PRISM *international*

Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world

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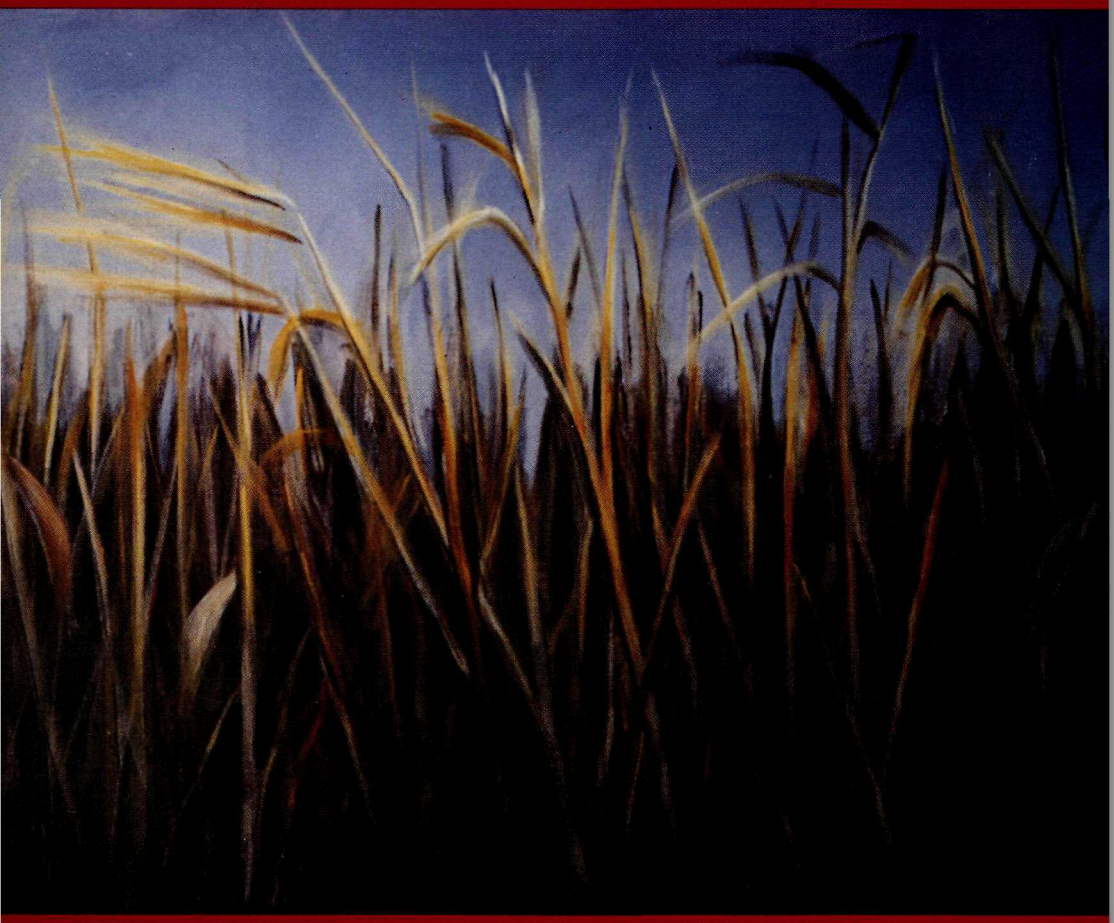

PRISM *international*

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Anne Marie's Bedroom

Jennifer Ross

This is where it starts; here, above the hip. An ivy, creeping its way over here and then circling the navel, before climbing its way up to here, the nipple. This I had done when I was nineteen so I could mark my body before anyone else could: to say, this is my body to do with as I please. In the time since I have added to the ivy various things at particular times. A hummingbird after I had my baby Anna. A honeysuckle to cover a surgery. A hurricane to fill in some space between my navel and my breasts: space that got larger as I got older. What does a hurricane look like as a tattoo? What indeed. You would really have to see it.

* * *

Fuck, I blew it. I knew there would be hell to pay—he'll never trust me again. I shouldn't have gone. I *had* to, that's all there is to it. I mean I couldn't pass up an opportunity to get away from here—if only for a weekend. No, I had to, I had to go. But now what's he going to do? He is going to be here any minute; he is on his way *now.* I've blown it. The Needle. Oh fuck.

* * *

The House I live in has ten men and ten women and my room at the top of the stairs is the largest room. I am the only woman who does not have to share, they say because I am mean, no one would want to share with me, I am crazy. But we are all crazy in here. That is the point. No, the reason I do not have to share is that I am the Queen, the Sacred Whore, the Madonna, the Ancient Babylonian Love Goddess. *You* call me Anne Marie.

People said, once you have one you won't be able to stop.

To my private room at the top of the stairs, the men of the House come to visit. You may say they are not much to look at, I don't mind, it is

no insult to me. After all, it is me they are lining up for, me. I am their soft pillow, their Milk, their Mother, their Solace, their Lover. And when they come, they come as I have told them; bearing gifts and sacred offerings. John: a comb for my hair, mother-of-pearl. Dick: a pair of silk garters and push-up bra, crimson red and lacy black. Roger: a bottle of No. 5 and lacquer for my nails. And Ed, my main man: a two-six of lemon gin and a soft pack of Camels.

Everybody told me, once you get started you won't be able to stop.

And what do I care that they make no money, that they have no money to give me. I say, it doesn't take any money, honey, to bring Anne Marie a present. So I make the suggestion, I tell them what I want. And they come, they stand outside my door, shifting or still, until I tell them to come in. I tell them, loosen up your belt and slacks, but don't take them off. Come over here and lie on top of me. Lift my skirt but don't take it off. Do it until you come, while I watch TV. But don't take too long, or I might not ask you back. Okay then?

Once you begin there's no turning back. When they are finished, I ask them to wipe me gently with a Kleenex from their pocket and to take the Kleenex with them as they leave. I tell them, on their way out: Don't say anything about me to the other guys, don't say my name outside this room. I don't want them taking my name in vain.

I was well warned. People said, you will regret it, there will come a day when you want to settle down—we all do sooner or later—and no decent, god-fearing, hard-working, family-loving guy will want to marry you then. And I said, is that right.

* * *

I lay down the rules; it frees them up and lets them breathe, lets them love me like a whore. And don't forget we all have to live in the same house together. We can't afford to have petty jealousies or any of them proclaiming they've fallen in love with me.

The only one who doesn't appreciate this arrangement is the Housemother; the one who gets paid to run the joint, only you'd think she's doing it because she's a saint. What can you expect of someone who cooks and cleans for a house of twenty loonies? This is not a field with room for advancement. She *hates* me entertaining the guys in my room, says it's sinful. She's a Christian Fundamentalist. She complains to my Social Worker about me, says: *We've really got to do something about that Anne Marie, her atrocious behaviour is corrupting the household.* But I really don't see why it is any of their concern.

If you do it, they said, you will be considered a freak.

But they make it their concern. So the Social Worker has to come and visit me. Poor Ron, he is *such* a loser, he's so burnt out and he *never* gets laid at home. How useful must he feel after visiting people who despise him, everyday for ten or fifteen years. He will parallel park poorly, climb the stairs to my room wearily, poke his curly perm around my door, and say: *Anne Marie, you aren't angling for a re-admission to Bellvue, are you? Funny, I wouldn't have thought you'd want to be going back there. And yet, judging by your behaviour as of late*. . . (A.M. lets her shoulders slump, just for a moment.)

The first one felt so good, but if you weren't involved in it, if you hadn't chosen it and someone was, say, twisting and pinching your skin to make you feel that way, well then I suppose the pain would be intolerable. But it wasn't that way for me. It was like getting a thousand bee stings, like getting a bee sting every second for three or four hours and—well—I guess I got hooked.

* * *

So now the Social Worker has assigned a Summer Student to me and she comes three times a week. The other day she came to my room and sat at the foot of my bed. I noticed the blouse she was wearing was too big in the bust. There were sunken tents of cotton where breasts were meant to be and it made her seem like a child playing someone else. She talks looking down at the hands in her lap. At least she doesn't constantly force eye contact. During her visit I snooped through her briefcase and read she was working on my "Grooming and Personal Hygiene" with me. So she says: *Well Hello, Anne Marie, How are you doing? Oh I see you've been making yourself look pretty.* Which really cracks me up because when I do my face I really paint it; I mean I put on butterflies and blossoms, whatever catches my fancy. And as the day wears on, I just keep adding more and more.

I mean she'd float away if you breathed on her. Looks like she'd crack if she spread her legs. And she's coming around telling me how to do myself up—barely nineteen. But I go along with her because I get a chuckle out of her being so sincere, imagining her going back to the Social Worker and saying: *I sure am making progress with Anne Marie.* So I'll let her say to me: *Gee, Anne Marie, you sure are looking pretty these days. But I have a suggestion for a way to do your make-up that would be real flattering to you.* And I'll let her spend an hour working on my face so that it will look like no one has worked on my face. And I'll say, Boy, doesn't that look nice.

I don't really see what the big deal is. I mean if the body is only a car, and

you had to drive the same car for, say sixty or eighty years, would you rather be in a Volkswagen covered in primer, or a Thunderbird in candy apple red with gold metallic flakes and 3-D decals?

* * *

So last Thursday the clothing allowance cheque came in—*fifty dollars*—and it was time to hit the Biway. We get there and Sunshine is being real sweet. She's terrified to have me out in public, poor kid, and why shouldn't she be: I am a huge responsibility.

It becomes immediately obvious we both want to get the shopping over with as quickly as possible. I cannot think of anything that appeals to me less than wrestling with someone's grandmother over an item of sale clothing in a pastel colour. And Sunny says: *Hey Anne Marie, here's a nice dress,* and holds up one of those duster numbers, you know, almost like a mumu. The dress is sort of four pastel colours but at the same time no colour at all—like porridge with violet flecks. So she holds it up and I say, Yeah that's real nice, what size is it? Great, that'll be just great.

Then we're moving back to where they have Ladies Shoes and she grabs this pair of mules and says: *Oh these look comfy, don't they Anne Marie.* I look at the pair of grey plastic things she's holding up and say, Yeah they look real comfy, what size are they? Great, those'll be just great.

So with all that settled, we make our way up the Check Out and there's a really long line—the Welfare cheques have come in—and Little Sunshine says: *Well I suppose you can wait in line by yourself. You don't mind, do you, if I go back and look at the ironing boards.* Mind? Go ahead, look at the ironing boards, of course. As she bobs away, a picture of Sunny wearing freshly ironed pyjamas in a polyester pinstripe, legs sharply creased, pops into my head. The door of her closet glides open to show hanging sheets of crisp tissue, separating one stiffly pressed blouse from the next. No sooner has she disappeared than I'm out of there like lightning, cheque in hand, merchandise tossed behind me as I go.

People said, it may seem like a fun thing to do now but you'll regret it later. Try picturing yourself as an octogenerian grandmother with your doodled elephant skin. I imagined my skin shrunken and withered, slack and sagged, or muscled and stretched, and realized that the pictures would distort accordingly, and I liked the idea. I thought about being sixty or eighty with this map of marks all over me and grandchildren saying "What's this, what's this" and I loved the idea. It might remind them and me I've come from somewhere.

* * *

I cashed my cheque at the Money Mart and took the streetcar to the Woodbine Bar out by the Track. I like it out there because if the guys are doing well, they'll keep you watered all night. And if they're not, well then I had my own money to spend.

I didn't come home for *two nights.* I partied with this Stan guy—and had a whale of a time until my money and his whiskey ran out.

Guys don't know how to take you, I mean they are not accustomed to a woman who looks like this. And people just assume you are bad, nasty, a deviant. They move away from you on the subway, give you a wide berth. And I say, GOOOOOOD.

* * *

I once had this little canary, Puff. I bought her one winter, seduced by the promise of waking to a sunlit bedroom and a merrily trilling bird. Everyone insisted the bird was no more than a common finch. Look, canaries have yellow breasts and puff their throats when they sing. This bird is shades of brown and its neck is still. No, I said, this canary is just a baby that hasn't yet reached maturity.

I went to the pet shop in the mall and bought an expensive vitamin supplement in liquid form. I was advised to add the prescribed amount, point-six-millilitres, to the canary's drinking water, fresh daily. If the bird was indeed a canary, the vitamin would help bring up the yellow in the feathers and bring on a strong song.

Through the winter I fed the bird the vitamin in her drinking water. The bird didn't change. I added more and more of a dosage until the bird's water was now bright yellow, as yellow as a canary's chest is meant to be.

I suppose the enriched water tasted too peculiar for the little bird, because she went off it and later—although I did not know it at the time—stopped drinking entirely.

One evening I came home to a quiet, dark apartment and found her, legs in the air, dead on the floor of her cage.

I buried her in a Tetley box.

* * *

Sunny is in a pretty pickle over my escape. She came in to visit me this morning and because she was carrying a Biway bag, at first I thought

she'd bought me the mumu and mules herself. So I let her sit at the foot of my bed, and after shooting the shit for five minutes she said: *Well Anne Marie, I know you are out of clothing money, so I got you these underpants that were on sale.*

I took them out of the bag and I could not believe my eyes. Seven pairs of extra large, 100% cotton briefs, all in baby pink. I don't even wear underwear—what's the point unless you need something to stick the maxi pad onto—and if I did it sure wouldn't be this kind. I said, well thanks a lot, I just didn't know how I was going to get along without decent underpants. Sunshine takes this opportunity to suggest I might want to do some mending, to make the most of the clothes I still had. A stitch in time. She left me with some needles and a spool of white thread, saying she'd be back to check on me in a couple of hours.

Listen, I have never stitched a seam in my life. But that pile of pink briefs gave me an idea. I went to the closet and pulled out a housecoat I hadn't worn in years—a fuzzy yellow number with black rickrack around the neck and zipper. I took a pair of nail scissors and yanked off all the rickrack, then took the scissors to the pile of underpants and snipped out the crotches from each and every pair, leaving a clean little oval. I took the rickrack and pressed it into place, around the openings, and sewed it on. And what a sight they were. I pulled a pair onto my head, another over my dress up around my hips, and the rest I flung on curtain rods and door handles. For a while I pranced around like that, a ballerina on a high wire.

Right on schedule—four o'clock sharp—Sunny patters in. Well she looked like she'd swallowed a bird. But Sunny Honey, I said, you know you gotta cut a diamond for its light to shine through.

* * *

What if my scribbled leather skin won't be appropriate then? But an aged, infirm body isn't appropriate to anyone, anyhow. If by then the only thing I have to regret are the marks, then I'll have done pretty well, I figure. No, by then they will just be relics of a former life, as will my uterus and other parts for that matter.

* * *

He's not going to do it. He just threatens. He said himself I manage without the promazine. Everyone is afraid of the stuff, right, you can watch the guys of the House line up for their Needle and, week after week, grown men, they will faint, wither like cut flowers in a too hot

room. I can't remember anything from back then, all that got erased. Oh the bastard, the pasty, mealy little crustacean. I would rather *die.* I won't, won't. I won't let him come near me. He'd better stay clear of me.

* * *

I blew it with that little binge, but it was real sweet to come home to the guys again. Someone had started the rumour I'd eloped with one of the cashiers from the Sev at the end of our street. Well *that* would be an attractive prospect. They had missed me something awful and I found them lined up waiting for me. The hall outside my bedroom was like an over-booked doctor's office. There they stood, backs against the wall, five against one wall, five against the other. They were all smoking their Player's filters and the smoke hung above their heads in a single cloud. As if they were sending their prayers to heaven in the smoke, the cloud read "Anne Marie". Actually Harry, who has never said two words to me in my life, got it in his head to spray paint my name blood red down the corridors. Through all the smoke it was a neat effect.

* * *

I shouldn't have taken off... Ron will... Oh God, The Needle... I'll be the same, same as the other others... loss of sex, hunger... twenty different people, the same person, seem like the same... sitting on bed, head in hands, legs like poured concrete... Oh God, so weak like you need a transfusion... weak like you haven't eaten for days... I shouldn't have gone... Ron is gonna... no memory, a day a week... if I can't remember I can't decide... I'll be the same... but by then, too late... afraid *not* to take the needle... too afraid not to... I know I've been told... my mind works against me... I've been told, I'm my own worst enemy... I'll *never* be well, my mind keeps me ill... don't know anymore, which is worse...

* * *

I wanted something to look at, and their being so permanent was the whole idea. Thinking of the skin as a scrap of paper, I wanted to decorate it in a pleasing way. Might as well if I am to have it before me all the livelong day. And all these years, they have been the only things I have owned. Of course they could never rob me of them. *For this reason they have made me feel reassured and more permanent.*

* * *

Well the body gets its battle scars in the course of living and all of them unpleasant: pock marks, a Caesarian, melanomas, liver spots. So, I thought, why not add *some marks: good marks, amulets, marks of my choosing. And, not scars, they would be badges, brooches to ensure distinction and safe passage through these events of life.*

* * *

Across my midriff a hurricane rages, strokes of red and green, so passionate, the perfect work of a master Japanese tattooist. Some have called them waves and others flames, but all have said they sound, and their sound is that of an inferno. As I grow older, the strokes have stretched, having more skin now to cover. But they cover, they do not leave me bare. Where once they were deep and ferocious, now they are soft like petals. What does a hurricane look like as a tattoo? You would really have to hear it.

George Amabile
to Annette

Night Letter

In the reef of lights across the *bahia*
only the beacon has a pulse, a small
flare that insists: *I am here. You are there.*

Crickets fill the dark with their glass ratchets
and headlights, like tiny pairs of eyes
die out then reappear on the coast road.

Today I photographed *bougainvillea:* gaudy
petals without fragrance, fluttering
like stained paper in the wind. Blackbirds

came down to bathe in the complex ripple
that lapped over the top step of the pool.
Their pale eyes glowed like fire opals

packed in soot; their long tails flagged
and spread as they hopped across the paved apron
laying their heads down sideways, graphite

beaks working to scrape drinks from the puddles left by the caretaker's
hose in dimpled stone.
I listened to palm fronds, quick

as a riffed deck of cards in the breeze.
Past midnight now and the sun burns
under my skin like a stifled passion

driving off water and salt. I can hear the sea
below me, drawing back, exploding against the cliff.
Smoke rises and lingers in the heavy air.

A storm shimmers deep in the hills, but here
it's dry and still. Released by the black scruff
of the forest, green sparks drift

and melt: fireflies: eccentric
signals of hunger and sex. In the silence
between heartbeats, a meteor

scratches the dark and fades
leaving no scar, no trace
of absence, even, on the night's bright face.

Anne Le Dressay

My grandmother

In her later years my grandmother
shrank to bone and frail
translucent skin,
weighed eighty pounds
when she died.

In my sleep, she pares flesh
from my bones.
When I turn in the night,
elbow clicks against hip,
hip grinds through the futon
to the frame beneath,
ribs poke.

Sometimes in the mirror
I catch shadows
of the chisel
that scoops my cheeks.

And though for months at a time
she lets me fatten
till the bones are muffled,
she returns in the dark of winter,
tapping my ribs,
reminding me.

Heather MacLeod

To Look for Something Familiar

I paint the outline of my body on the floor and lie inside the chalked shape of who I am. I paint my sister's nude body for Samhain turning her small breasts into eyes; our mother laughs and bites her nails; I dress up as Wednesday Addams and get sick of the snapping of my own fingers.

After the women died in Montreal my mother still wanted to eat her birthday cake, but I said we couldn't. Instead we went outside and on the street I painted the white outline of my sister's body in various poses fourteen times.

When my family leaves in the morning I get up and I paint as many things as I can; my sister comes home early and I paint her nude body and then photograph her juxtaposed against the various scenes in the house. I like it when they come home, but don't recognize anything except me. I want them to feel like I feel. I want everything to be suspect.

Coral Hull

how do detectives make love

how did my parents make love/ was it in the 1950s
way/ in their pyjamas under the blankets/ could my
father switch off from his job as he switched the
light off/ when he made love with my mother in the
dark/ did they laugh/ even though he told me he
couldnt bear to fuck her unless he was drunk/ did
he still pick up the bits & pieces of people from
under trains/ or leftovers from motorbike accidents/
the bloodied thighs & thighless women & eyeless
torsos/ did he fondle the falling away breasts of
bloated corpses dragged from rivers with concrete
boots/
was my mothers body the autopsy or the
imitation pornography from his blue movie/ & was
his penis the 38 automatic or the black baton that
he used to strike out with/ was their marital bed
like the cold river bottom churning with unfound
death/ how do detectives make love/ did he talk code
into her soft earlobe or whisper sweet double talk
into her lips/ did he tape record her nocturnal
sighs & her vulnerable words/ taking them down into
his notepad heart to be withheld/ & used in a court
of law as evidence against her/ did he keep her
writhing loss of self under strict surveillance/

could he love her/ opening his blue shirt or plain
clothes up to her/ dropping away his folded arms his
handcuffs & identification badge/ could he forget
the prostitutes drug addicts screaming domestics
battered wives shootouts & suicides/ the women in
prison & the raped & bloodied murdered women/ could
he switch off from them/ like he switched the
bedroom light off/ what did he feel in the dark/

with my mothers warm body beside him/ could he let
himself be seen fully/ by her lovely half opened
sexy eyes/ or by hard courthouse hearings &
underworld gazes/ threatening to remember him
expose & destroy him/ did he go undercover for fear
of being found/
                did he take down her details or have
her followed/ could he give a full description of
the woman who loved him/ did my mother find a
trembling & vulnerable man/ did she fingerprint &
file him/ could he be revealed in a second before
orgasm/ only to be charged with breaking & entering/
before his own little death before the loud phone
rang/ before the infringing twenty-four hour call/
the hurried reaching for his dressing gown/ in the
cold & stabbing air/ the impatient rap at the door/

could he love her the way that she loved him/ or
would he charge her with trespass/ his cold heart
prohibited/ jammed up in car wreckages/ alone on
grey train platforms pursued by criminals/ bashed
up in nightclubs or in kings cross brothels/ sobbing
in empty patrol cars or in big dark paddy wagons/
darkly in love completely alone/ with bitten down
thumbnails on the neighbourhood rounds/ in the early
hours of the morning/ the doubtful silences of her
waiting/ the two-way radio left on/ becoming fuzzy
switched off/ the heart imprisoned/ her sigh his
cough

Safe Places On Earth

Oscar Martens

"No mercy without imagination"
—Somebody

I've been from coast to coast, crossing borders in trucks or rattling motorhomes. I have stolen lunch money, firearms and clothes from a laundromat dryer. Once I rolled a paperboy. I have been kicked in the head by a hooker I tried to rob in Denver. I lay in the dirt while she squatted over me and washed my cuts with her piss, stuffing a dirty American twenty in my mouth. I am the wrong kind of famous in Montana and Nova Scotia.

My life is rich and meaningless.

Rivers, M.B.

Combine lights seen from the bus window sweep along the dry prairie stubble, and below it, in the darkness, the wide mouth pulls in its straight flat tongue of wheat.

Coming into Rivers in perfect time, the tail end of summer, harvest time, with gears spinning in their hot grease all day, slowing only when the women come in pick-ups to bring hot meals in tin foil, their asses filling the grooves of the tires.

Stepping off the bus into the dusty heat, walking back over the creek, up the hill, down the gravel lane between the wind break where the dogs begin to bark and run towards me.

Another yard light switches on, another in the kitchen, throwing a square of light onto the yard. Standing on the front steps, hoping the Dycks will remember me from three summers ago.

Mrs. Dyck silent behind the screen door in a shadow while she puts her glasses on. Pushing the door towards me and pulling me into the parallel dimension of the Rural Manitoba Farmhouse, unchanged from one year to the next, bible verses hanging from small plaques over the kitchen table, butterfly fridge magnets holding up the shopping list, and the smells of summer sausage, *Zwieback* and *Rollkuchen*.

Strangers

There are three types of strangers: the complete stranger, the perfect stranger and the total stranger. I am all of these.

The complete stranger has nothing and that is exactly what he needs. He has appeared and will appear in the future as someone who belongs exactly where he is at any given time. You don't look twice at his face because he has always been there and when he leaves you will not notice. When he is gone you will not remember.

The perfect stranger is almost always grey and when he is not grey he is beige. These are the primary colours of the man-made world in which he can easily hide.

In order to hide from you, he would sit right next to you while grey thoughts looped in his brain, as he sat with grey posture and matched the grey faces of those around him.

The total stranger is the sum of the parts of his life.

Rivers, M.B.

The Dycks had enough help for harvest that first summer but they let me do odd jobs like bringing meals to the men or painting fence posts.

I spent time around the house, snooping through their things. In the sewing room, on the top shelf I found back issues of the *Mennonite Reporter* from '72 on.

There were Mennos everywhere from Skookumchuck to Madagascar. I had discovered a network of gullible do-gooder pacifists ready to be exploited. The Dycks were delighted with my interest in the Mennonite church.

When I had enough information, I began writing reference letters for myself. I started with names:

Peter Dyck
Irene Friesen
Agnes Paetkau
Bernie Weins
Henry Loewen
John Remple
Elmwood Mennonite Church
"Sing to the Lord" Mennonite Choir

Dear Bernie (pastor of target church):

You probably don't remember me but we met at the '82 General Conference in Wichita, Kansas (lie) and participated in a discussion group on "The Healing Power of Christ" (lie). I have fond memories of our fellowship and sharing (big lie).

I am writing this letter to introduce you to John Remple, a dedicated member of our congregation who has decided to move to Calgary in order to be closer to his sister who is ill (lies, lies, lies).

John has just been through a troubling time (no job, no money, no future) and would appreciate your support (how about a place to stay).

Many Conference members here have spoken of your generosity and unfailing stewardship (meaningless Christian buzzword which will induce guilt if John (me) does not receive assistance).

I'm sure John will benefit greatly from your guidance (implied request and assumption that Bernie will help).

Yours
Sincerely (tee hee),

Henry Loewen
Elmwood Mennonite Church

Language

The alphabet is my best weapon.
It's all there.

↓

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

↑

That's all you need
to slip through bars
or start a holy war.

Mennonite Ideology

Mennonites believe in God. I believe in Mennonites but through my reading I have come to a disturbing revelation. Modern Mennonite faith is based on prudence. The original movement was not. Early converts ran from disgruntled clergy who wanted to stretch them on racks, castrate them with white-hot pinchers and scrape out their eyes with wire brushes.

It has become a comfortable religion. Those who met in caves and shared the dangerous new words would be disappointed to find their pale followers clinging to ancient ideals which have become easy to hold, even fashionable.

I doubt that you could sell the religion in its original form. Believe this, even though they might torture you. Say this, even though you might die. Untested faith leaves them spiritually fat.

Drowning

How could you call it murder? I was holding his head. Underwater. And I kept holding it and I remember it was very hot for early morning and the water was just over my waist in the murky muddy Assiniboine so that I couldn't see him beneath the surface.

How long did I hold him after he had stopped thrashing? Half an hour or an hour? How could it have been anything but peaceful, letting go, letting him drift free of my hands, his hair through my fingers.

Camp

The camp is dark except for one light at the main centre. It's a Mennonite camp which means that I must stay in the empty counsellor's quarters till midnight, then stumble to her mobile without a flashlight and hiss under her window screen.

In the morning I watch from the arena fence as she drives in horses from pasture, her chin down slightly, warmed by the rough Carhartt, small branches slapping her chinks. She dismounts 3-10 and begins to cut away horses for the first ride of the day.

An old canner named May who has become fond of me over the last few days, wanders over to me. Flies eat her eye sand and I can tell by the lazy way she blinks that she's tired. She moves away when Michelle comes to get her for the ride but Michelle just keeps walking after her, walking, as I see her patience and love her for it, walking.

Things I miss

1. My name
2. The luxury of answering the door
3. The luxury of answering the phone
4. The luxury of arousing suspicion
5. The luxury of telling the truth
6. The exotic and comforting mediocrity of beef stroganoff, venetian blinds and a full bag of grass clippings by the curb
7. Credit cards

Fisherman's Wharf

Which one was it? Rows and rows of dumpy plywood shacks that floated. She slowed in the middle of Dock "C" in front of the smallest one, painted like a zebra. It was refreshing or insane, just like the occupant and as we got on and sent a set of oily ring waves across Fisherman's Wharf I thought of our position on the water, floating on top of something huge, like a water bug must feel on a lake, buoyed by tension only, and that solid land was not real, but rather a large floating raft constantly moving and things were more fragile and temporary than they seemed. I had all those thoughts waiting for Ms. Klassen to unlock the hatch and when she finally did I grabbed her ass with both hands as she bent over to step in and I forgot about my lake-bug existence.

Britannia Yacht Club

There's a place where you can go to stand and wait as they pass in their boats. And if you've had a chance to shave and comb your hair and are wearing clothes that aren't obviously dirty you might be asked to crew. A woman might come over, as her boat is being refuelled and invite you onboard.

And moments later you're wrapping rope around a capstan and telling ferocious lies, inventing new extended families and an intricate personal history.

The captain decides to give up the race you have entered. Cutthroat crazy rich people slice past on either side as the helmsman sets a course for the islands where you drop anchor.

Several wine bottles later, you fling the bones of the BBQ chicken overboard and loll about in your fattened state. The anchor is pulled, the sun is setting, a course is set and the boat is moving slowly, one sail only.

Definitions

Criminal—Not in any way resembling a human. No one you might know or would have raised.

Hardened criminal—Label used to justify any punishment.

Cold-blooded murder—The opposite of hot-blooded murder. Severity of punishment according to temperature of blood. Crime done under influence of childish fit deemed to be less serious regardless of end result. The incident in Billings was unavoidable. The temperature of my blood was ninety-eight point six degrees.

Correctional institute—The cage, prison, jail, the bighouse, the can, the slammer, joint, summer camp, headwaters of Shit Creek, where criminals (see def'n) go to get hardened, fun house, repentance factory, the zoo, hell's waiting room, not a deterrent, not a cure, society's bottom drawer.

Safe places on earth—The only safe place on earth is a coffin.

Regina, S.K.

I am dining with the parents of the singer I fucked last night. The roast beef is dry but the meal is saved by a sharp chutney and perfectly roasted carrots. The struggle-with-faith act I used on the girl has similar success with the arrogant ABS, RSP, GIC, PHD father who assures me that despite his obvious and overwhelming success as a human, he too had once doubted the Mennonite faith.

He is preaching about what the scripture clearly tells us while I am thinking about the girl who sits across from me, trying to smell her no-nonsense Christian-white panties, her soap, the excessive baby powder she puffs up into her armpits every morning.

This act is the strongest of my Christian series personas. Being lost invites the target Christian to lead, something which they cannot help themselves from doing. With women it brings out a mothering instinct, especially in those who are in desperate need of mothering themselves.

And so, the concert last night, a Mennonite choir, the scanning of rows of women, their lips making openings of various shapes and sizes, a vulnerable face, a game of eye tag setting us on tracks that will join, compliments after the concert, her suggestion to join the group for coffee, staying at the restaurant until all others had left, my hint about my troubled life, my dilemma, my weakness feeding her strength, her chance to be her own mother and mother herself, my polite and timid manner and the way I stand next to her car in the parking lot, looking like I don't know where I should or could be next, that practised look of no direction, lamb

before slaughter, innocent, a look which guarantees access to whatever a victim can offer: a ride, a cup of herbal tea, a comforting hand on the shoulder, pity for my well-timed tears, a comforting hand on the breast, displaced stuffed animals and thick comforters etc.

I cannot help but be impressed by the skills I have developed. My head nods appropriately, my pupils face Our Father, my nose seeks traces of a woman while I appraise the potential post-fence value of the stereo in the living room, Yamaha I think, flirting with me, its decibel band flashing an invitation.

The future

when I reach sixty
I will no longer be able
to deny anything

fingering the holes in my heart
standing with my heart in my hands
fingering the holes and tears

I will be
barefoot on the concrete
standing on every corner at once

R.J. Powell

two poems

High Noon

At this time the shadows lose their social utility. They point neither to future nor to past, neither back at the morning nor ahead, into the night. Selfishly they gaze straight down into themselves, those fascinating depths.

Due to this shadowy irresponsibility, the world at this hour occasionally loses its sense of time. In the bright sunshine, around the axles of the shadows, it comes to an abrupt standstill. The flickering in the treetops stops; washing freezes on the lines; on the road a car halts without its brakes; and in a doorway a woman stands paralyzed, her open mouth filling with sky.

Meantime, high in the air a group of crows has been trapped. With looks of genuine shock on their faces, they hang in front of the sun like insects caught in amber, while far below on the motionless earth their shadows lie like punctuation marks.

Fortunately for all concerned, the effect doesn't last. The shadows suddenly remember their obligation to civilization and duly begin to lean in the general direction of afternoon. Trees bend, washing billows, the car lurches forward, the woman's voice gets free of her mouth, and the crows flap away through the brightness.

Their shadows, however, pause for a few instants. They tremble but hesitate, as if they've developed a taste for introspection. Then, with some regret, they follow their dark birds over the horizon.

A Shepherd's Death

1.

At two in the afternoon
a week after Easter
he walked a hundred yards
from his parents' house into the woods
and pressed a trigger.

In the pasture
the sheep leapt in fright,
gazed briefly around,
and one by one
resumed their grazing.

2.

Such solitude.

At night I
walk past the spot
and it is not horror but loneliness
that pours from the black woods over
the road, catching
my knees.

That on a bright Spring day a man
fixed it so that his father and brothers
would find him,
barely recognizable,
and so see him finally.

3.

A few days later, a dog
bursts into the pasture,
to chase the ewes,
a week from lambing.

I help the brothers
chase the dog to the river.

From a far corner
of the field
the shepherd watches,
his hands in his pockets in
the rain.

He gazes away.
He no longer cares
about the sheep, the lambs.

4.

Some of you will know the place
where he stood at last
the gun in his mouth.

You go
through a forest far
less dense than it appears.

There is a broken wall, the ground
is covered with leaves from the past,

the birds sing
in a separate world,
and no one asks you
where you are going.

5.

When I was a child
there was a windmill
standing on four metal legs
alone in a field near our house.
Under it, a pump
seized with rust,
and under the pump
darkness.

A well long
out of use, and we lay
on the planks that covered it,
peering between them into that throat,
scaring each other with tales
of what it had swallowed:
a snake, a groundhog, boys.

At night the windmill
stayed in its place,
a derelict
pointing at heaven,
but the darkness broke free,
roamed under the earth,
came up by our beds,
and we scrambled
away, hunted

across fields, shivering
in the bright oven of summer.

6.

He was buried on April 17th
at the deepest point
of a grey afternoon.

There was wind,
flowers,
some children watched
from the churchyard gate.

Spring ripens.
One by one, crying forlornly,
lambs slip from the warm, safe place
into the world.

Micheal Sean Bolton

Noctuid

The morning throws crosses
into a reek of tobacco smoke
and perfume. Flecks of dead skin
float through light:
a small Gothic. A warm stranger
struggles for contact against
the constricting flesh of her host.
This sorrow is the passing
of days without meaning,
the oscillation of fan blades
cutting shadows into
peeling walls.

He has taken a moth's carcass
from the floor beneath the light.
It is weightless like something
that has never been alive,
its wings leave a silver dust
on his finger tips that has
no scent. The woman shifts
in the bed.

He rubs the moth dust onto
his lips, lets the corpse fall
to the floor. Her lips had been
a soft fire, familiar
within dream. He is left
with thirst, and the taste
of venom in his mouth.

In her sleep the woman says,
"I am leaving now."
Her sleep says,
"Kiss goodbye."

Kato Shuson
translated from the Japanese by Masaya Saito

Six Haiku

Killing an ant
I have been seen
by my three children

The chill of spring
an iron chain
dragged across the deck

In the snow
the crow's body lies
eyes open

Passing by
seeing autumn wind
blowing at a pine's wound

Licking light snow
a calf in the freight car
travels along

A swing—
elusive, a face
goes and comes

Moving

J.A. Hamilton

I don't know how it happened. My wife went out and bought a house without me. I came home from a five day trip and my wife said, Have I got a surprise for you honey. The twins said, Wait till you see, Daddy, just wait.

And were they right. Was I surprised when Janey drove me across the island and turned in at a driveway near town.

Get out, she said and when I didn't she jerked on my elbow, grinning.

I said slowly, my voice coming out in a croak, Janey, what is this?

Daddy, Anna said, get out, come on, you have to.

The house was white clapboard on a thick lot sided by streams and was a house I knew, did I ever know it. I grew up in this town. This was old Martha Gremble's house.

Old dead Martha Gremble's house.

Why? I asked, not saying about the sudden knot of fear in my gut I couldn't understand or dismiss, what's here?

Janey sighed, exasperated. Just get out, Bob, okay? Just humour me.

I grunted and got out and there I was standing on Martha Gremble's dirt driveway as if I weren't thirty-five and married with eight-year-old kids. My legs felt as mobile as stumps; I couldn't get them moving.

I said, I can't go in there, Janey. If you want me to go in there I'm telling you right now I can't. I didn't say why, I didn't admit my gut was rolling.

Bob really, my wife said. You'll like this.

The twins, Anna on one side and Gray on the other, propelled me onto the front steps. Green wooden steps, the paint peeling, steps I had painted the summer after my mother died. I broke away and stopped to light a cigarette.

Daddy, the twins moaned but I ignored them and inhaled long and smooth then told Janey, I don't see why you're doing this.

My wife brushed past me, climbed to the porch and stood there with her hands on her hips looking half-way to lost, looking baffled and hurt.

I said dangerously, This is Martha Gremble's place. I don't know why you brought me here. Martha Gremble's dead.

Martha Gremble lives! Janey crowed and then said, No, I'm just kidding. Please c'mon honey. Wait till you see it.

There was something I wanted my wife to understand. I said, Martha Gremble was my mother's best friend.

I asked your father to meet us here, said Janey nodding and smiling.

I leaned against the basement foundation and stared out at the street, at the new plastic green and yellow house opposite and then the ocean. It was late spring and getting hot: there were sailboats out there. I smoked the cigarette down to the nub and stubbornly refused to move. The kids went up beside Janey then ran down past me and around the side of the house, shouting.

Janey paced a minute and started down toward me.

I don't like this house, I told her, enunciating carefully. I never liked this house and I don't see why you brought me here.

We stood there. Janey realized I was serious, I really was upset. She said, I thought... Your father said you'd love it. He said it was perfect.

It's not perfect. I shook my head. And then to convince her I added, Trust me, it's not perfect.

Just come and see inside.

There was no reason to be pissed off at my wife but I said, No. You tell me why we're here first. I said, There's no reason for us to be at Martha Gremble's house.

Bob, said Janey, her voice shrill. She said, I bought it. I bought us this house.

I looked back at the ocean. Anger was coming up hot behind my eyes, my eyes were starting to burn.

Say something for Christ's sake, Janey said.

Should I have something to say? I asked her.

Bob please.

I said, My wife goes out and buys about the only house in the country that I hate, goes out and buys it while I'm off looking for Chippendale reproductions without even telling me or saying Bob, dear, what do you think?

Bob, she said then. I... Bob.

You didn't really buy this dump, Janey.

She nodded.

You really bought this dump. Old Martha Gremble's place. You signed the papers?

We can put it back on the market, Bob. She was your mother's friend. She was like a second mother to you. When it came on the market at our price I just thought, Snap it up.

No.

I'm sorry, Bob. Oh shit.

I couldn't say anything. She wasn't sorry enough, in my opinion. The fist in my gut turned over and hit me.

Janey said, You could at least look at it. Her voice went wiggly; there was splotchy red in her cheeks.

I didn't answer. I was mute. I didn't know what I was doing, why I was wrecking this for her. Apart from Janey buying a house without me, I couldn't get near it, the Martha Gremble thing. I hadn't tried to remember it for twenty years and there had to be a way not to remember it for twenty or forty more. One way was not to buy Martha Gremble's house. Bad enough I had to pass it every day, bad enough it sat on the main road like a gullumphing measle, an accusation made mortar, bad enough I once said Sweetheart let's move west and have some kids. Let's go to the island where I grew up.

Janey was near tears. I knew the warning signs, that slant to her mouth, the way her brows reshaped themselves. How she turned her hands over and over. I said, Have a cigarette.

I didn't look at her except peripherally but I said Have a cigarette, you'll feel better.

Not caring that she'd quit. That edge in my voice.

She pulled one from my pack and sank down on the steps to smoke it. The twins were quiet; I didn't hear their voices anywhere.

Janey sighed.

Old Martha, I said, well.

Old dead Martha, Janey said.

I laughed short and sharp. Old dead Martha, I repeated. Janey, who would have thought? I probably won't ever forgive you.

It has a beautiful yard, Janey told me.

This yard? I said. Janey, this grass is nearly three feet high.

Well I mean under all the mess. Your dad says she was one of the best gardeners on the island. There's lilacs, a whole hedge of seven foot lilacs. This cigarette is making me dizzy, Bob. Out back there's a weeping willow. There's camellias in the garden; azaleas. Don't you like that Bob? You know I like lots of flowers. I like a landscaped yard.

She knew I hated flowers. I said, Look at this yard Janey.

There's berries. I don't know what kinds, I guess blackberries and strawberries, I don't know.

You bought the house but you don't know what kind of berries are growing?

Please Bob.

What?

Please try for me. She sighed and stubbed out the cigarette. Look, she said, there's your dad now. And the agent.

I said, I'm taking our car and leaving.

There's an apple tree, she added hopefully as my father's grey Subaru crunched on the gravel.

A woman in a Century 21 jacket wagged her fingers at us and held up a 'Sold' sign, grinning. Dad made a 'V' for victory sign. I looked back at Janey who had tears spilling from her eyes.

I said, Well Jesus Janey.

It was such a bargain.

Jesus, honey.

This was a sore spot between us, the house thing, anyway. It was all Janey's money, I didn't have any. When we'd come to the island Janey started an interior design business on a dirty shoestring of mine and built it up. I did the antique shop. She excelled. I did the antique-cum-junk shop and tried to hide how I sometimes wanted to enter her clients' homes and drip solvent on their leather sofas, throw black across her frescoed walls. I did not tell her I went giddy with desire—for bad fortune, for ugliness, for scratches on varnished oak floors.

Now I said, Hi Dad. I shrunk back.

Son, he said. Hi Janey. You know my son don't you Sheila? Sheila, Bob. How was the trip, son?

We've never met, the agent said, putting out her hand which I ignored. She winked at Janey and said, I thought I'd get the 'Sold' sign up.

He won't go in, Janey said, he refuses. She kissed Dad's cheek and took the 'Sold' sign from the agent.

I shrugged.

Dad frowned. Your mother would be so happy for you. Thinking of you living here.

Sheila said, It's a diamond in the rough. Your wife cut quite a deal.

I said, My mother's dead. She's been dead for twenty-five years. I was nine years old when she died, she can't be happy about a damned thing.

Martha took you in, Dad said, didn't she? Martha Gremble was almost a mother to you. You should be glad you have a chance to live in her house.

She wasn't, I said under my breath. She was not anything like a mother.

Dad and Janey and the agent exchanged looks. Janey swiped under her eyes with the back of her fist.

I said, Martha Gremble was a real bitch. The words came out hollowly, like there wasn't conviction behind them.

Martha Gremble was a lady, Bob, Dad said dismissing this. Distracted, he looked around. Where are the kids?

Janey said, I don't know, here somewhere.

Let's go in, Dad said.

Fine, Janey said glaring at me.

Dad and Sheila started up. Sheila was in her late forties and her butt, under its short jacket and skirt, was enormous. I watched her shake.

Janey waited for me to say I'd come. Finally she leaned the 'Sold' sign against the railing, held it with her knee and fished in her pocket. She passed me a yellow brooch rimmed with zircons.

I found it in Martha's closet, she said quietly. I saved it for you.

I took it and turned it over.

Lucky me, I said. It was warm from lying in Janey's pocket. Warm like a fever. I threw it as hard as I could, almost to the street. We heard the rustle as it fell through a forsythia bush.

Janey regarded me. You are lucky, she said tightly. Too bad you don't know it. She turned and walked up the steps. In a minute the kids charged past me and followed her in.

My heart did not bounce. I couldn't even think. I watched the ocean and tried to cheer myself up by wishing one of the twins would get sick with something terrifying but curable. No, not curable, terminal. Really terminal. Leukemia. A brain tumour. I tried to see Gray bald, suffering and weakening, me the father of the child needing the collection boxes in the pharmacy, in the banks, in the churches. Yes. Or Janey. My wife with a heart condition. Better. A defective valve in her heart and me able to hear her when she walked. I thought of her face gaunt. I thought of her turning to me with need and gratitude because I was there and she loved me, because I was her shield from danger and pain. I imagined telling the twins to be brave when Janey entered hospital—her hand clutched in mine and so thin and sweaty, that plea in her eyes!

Shit, I said. I kicked the 'Sold' sign, got in the car and drove home.

Home was a rented bungalow on a lake front. Four months ago it had been sold out from under us and we'd gotten notice: hence the flurry to suddenly purchase, hence the boxes stacked everywhere like weird deco art, hence the anticipated but temporary move into my father's house. Hence Janey going out and buying Martha's place: I'd told her just how long I was willing to spend at Dad's. Two to four days, tops. Nothing against my father but I didn't want to live with him. Two weeks, tops, I'd said.

It was strange to be home alone, the house empty. I tried to imagine it with the new owners in it, a woman, a man looking out our south facing

picture windows, a woman, a man using our toilet and stove and refrigerator, spreading themselves around. Getting rid of us. Kids in the twins' bedrooms. Maybe they'd fix the leaking roof; probably they would. Maybe they'd put in a better woodstove. All our years' worth of living would be wiped out, all our fights, the fun things, the good things. Already the curtains were down, the bookshelves empty. I poured a scotch and took it to the front yard where nothing had changed except that Janey hadn't kept up with weeding the gardens. The deer came in and ate the blooms off the peas and ate the immature peaches anyway and this year, since we were leaving, she couldn't be bothered to string human hair, to paint egg yolk, to fence higher yet. But the view was unchanged, the rickety wooden lawn chairs unchanged. I settled in. A hawk circled overhead with a snake in its talons, waving. At the sheep farm opposite a horse stood flicking flies with its tail, its head hanging down.

Janey didn't come back. When dusk set in I made myself two sandwiches. I was tired from the buying trip. My mind kept swinging to Martha Gremble, to the prospect of living in her house, and I turned on the television so I wouldn't brood. When I heard Dad's car pull up at ten I turned off the set and went to bed to read.

I hardly did read. I had *The Russia House* that Janey had ordered from a book club in my hands and another scotch by my side, but I just listened to my family, to my wife's voice and my father's. I was numb. I wasn't feeling a thing except the booze in my stomach. The twins came in to say goodnight. Anna smelled like talc, a smell of vast association for me since Janey had used it all the time I'd known her. I kissed her and then hugged Gray who nearly didn't let me get away with it; girl stuff, he called it. Then I listened for Janey, signs that she was starting a pot of coffee to drink with Dad.

But Dad left and Janey came in our room and started undressing. She nodded at me but she didn't say anything. She threw her dress on a cardboard box that said 'Viva'.

I laid there thinking up ways to kill her, ways to snuff my wife out. Now she was brushing her hair. She had sensational black hair, long and straight, and she brushed it two hundred strokes before bed each night. Even if I grabbed her she laughed and said, Hang on Bob, I haven't even done my hair. Hold onto your britches. I could make it look like suicide: Poor depressed Janey I'm so sad she drove off a cliff. Poor dead Janey. Dead dead dead Janey. She slit her wrists? Poor poor Janey. She took an overdose of valium? Oh gosh how sad.

Now she was shaking her hairbrush at me. I couldn't see her, though, she was dead, I'd killed her and stuffed her body in a garbage bag. It was a warm night, the window was open. Six miles away lights were reflect-

ing on the ocean and the glare was enormous. I was up to page nineteen. If she had bought Martha's house, Janey was dead. Period.

Her mouth said,

Dead. Really, I wished I were dead. I was so embarrassed. Shiela came all the way over from Vancouver to show me that house. It wasn't even officially listed yet Bob. I was mortified. Don't you ever do that to me again.

The only operative word was dead which rhymed with bed. On the bed were four pillows I could use to smother her. Two were designer pillows.

All this nonsense about nasty old Martha Gremble. You *said* buy anything. You said, I don't care what you buy. You said you'd be happy in an outhouse if we owned it, if I didn't pull you around to any more showings. If we didn't have to move in with your dad. So we own it. And then you humiliate me in front of your father, in front of Shiela.

She walked to the bed and hit it with the hairbrush. Taps really, ghost taps. I flipped a page.

How many houses did we see? Twenty? Thirty? You said, Sweetheart, no more. I'm going on a buying trip. Find us somewhere to live. So I found us somewhere. What do you want from me? She spread her arms. I don't know what you expect from me.

She yanked the book out of my hands and moved in close. Her breath smelled like mouthwash.

Okay, I said surrendering. Fine. Just leave me alone.

What's fine?

I don't have a problem with the house, Janey, all right? Now goodnight. I turned off the reading light and rolled so my back was to her.

She crawled over me. She was weighty for a corpse. She shook my shoulder.

Bob?

I'm asleep. Can't you see I'm asleep? Leave me alone.

Talk to me.

You're dead. I don't communicate with the dead. I don't have extrasensory perception. I wish I did, I'd levitate out of here.

Honey if you won't talk to me—

Honey? she said. Honey?

I heard her frustration. She was willing to consort with me to get me to talk. She was willing to kiss my cheek, my nose, my neck.

Tell me, she said, kissing.

Tell you? There's nothing to tell. It's a five bedroom house, you got it dirt cheap, what's to say?

I don't know! Janey cried. Tell me.

When I didn't her tone grew dangerous. She said, Well piss on you.

Fine.

Why are you like this? You're getting so touchy these days.

I hate moving, okay?

There was a long silence then and Janey moaned. Finally she threw herself down on her side of the bed and wrenched the blankets over her body.

I pulled them back and she let me have them.

At breakfast the next morning Janey's eyes were red as if she'd had too little sleep. She was very short with the twins, running them through their Cheerios and orange juice as if their school bus arrived an hour earlier on mornings she hated me.

At last she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat with it at the table, both hands around the mug.

She said slowly, distinctly, her voice full of reason: Bob the thing is. I have to know whether to list the house again or what we're going to do. You have to tell me.

I have a say? I asked and picked up the paper. I was hungover and still mad. Mad at myself for being mad. I shook the paper open.

Our landlord sold this house, Bob. We have less than two weeks before we have to be out. And the new house needs work. It needs new plumbing. I need teams to rip some walls out, lay tile. So I have to know. Do we move in there with as much as I can get done in two weeks, or go to your dad's for awhile? Or not get it. I can see the lawyer today if you say so. We can try to stop the conveyance. List it right away.

I'm perfectly happy, I said. That tone my wife hates.

It's just a house, Janey said tightly.

Martha Gremble's house, I said.

Okay. So tell me. She beat you, right? Something terrible happened to you there.

It wasn't something Martha had done, it was something I'd done. At least, I thought it was. I didn't know what, but something. And whatever it was, it was no business of Janey's. To shut her up I said, Right. Martha whipped me with the toaster cord and held my head in the toilet. Satisfied? Huh, are you satisfied? I put down the paper and glared at her.

Janey leaned and grabbed my arm. She said, Oh Bob.

Very melodramatic; it gave me pleasure to see that naked sympathy. Finally I smiled and said, Just kidding.

Janey was silent. I could feel her spitting nails, they were landing like acupuncture wounds all over me. Finally, wordlessly, she left the room. I read sports then started on the first section. I was almost to editorials when my wife came back.

She was dressed now, in business clothes. She had a busy schedule. Move or no, she had clients waiting for her to say, Green couch, fabric walls and oriental carpet. Black vase there. Stucco wall here. Crepe flowers there. I side-eyed her, feeling remorse, thinking how sometimes I felt love for this woman. But all the same, shit.

Janey saw me looking and said, I just want you to know that once I start this ball rolling I won't be able to stop it. It'll be too late to change your mind.

I lifted my eyebrows. Change it? I said. Janey, I'd be happy just to find it. Maybe it's in Martha's basement. Let's go over there later, honey, and check.

You're insufferable. I'm your wife. If you can't talk to me who can you talk to?

I said, That massacre in Tiananmen is making students in Canada apply for refugee status.

Fine, Janey said. Have it your way.

And ambassadors. Chinese ambassadors all over the world are defecting.

After that we were packing full tilt and Janey was never home. During all her spare time she was over at Martha's, renovating, supervising renovation teams. The plan was to spend two weeks at Dad's then move in with the new house mostly finished. With the worst of it done. One day Janey brought home a trivet in the triangular shape of the flat of an iron. She put it into my hands, stained and marked, an icon. I almost threw it at her. Another time, smiling with reconciliation, she brought me whiskey bottles and told me how she'd pried them from under a loose floorboard or up the fireplace flue: they were marked 'Canadian Rye Whiskey, aged in wood', mickeys. Martha's bottles hidden in the ceilings, in the compost crib. Janey grinned and said tentatively, That old Martha.

I said back, Old dead Martha. I was trying hard to swallow the fear lodged like a growth in my throat. Old dead Martha—a joke, but a joke with cobwebs and rust and invisible damage to my liver.

I managed a wan smile and Janey asked if I was all right. I'm okay, I said. Sure.

You're sure it's okay with you, to move there?

She was just some old woman, I said.

Talk to me Bob.

I couldn't help myself. I turned away and said, I am talking. This is me, talking.

Janey said, I just think this thing of yours, whatever it is, is behind us and you start up. I've apologized five hundred times.

I know, I told her and said sincerely, I'm sorry. I don't even know what it is. I did something—

We don't *have* to move there. We can still stay at your dad's until we sell it.

I'd given up thinking we wouldn't be moving there. I was marching toward it. I hardly even blamed Janey by now; this wasn't about Janey, I realized that. It wasn't her fault. I was being a jerk. I said, You've already gutted the kitchen.

Janey shrugged, said, I do that Bob. I gut things.

Unable to resist I said, Tell me about it.

Anna came in and said, Gray's a geek. Gray called me a fucking asshole.

I ruffled her hair.

Janey said, Anna I didn't hear that.

Anna said, He turned off Alvin and the Chipmunks. He thinks he's so cool.

He is cool, Anna, I told her. Gray is a very cool kid.

Janey said, When is enough enough? Either talk to me or I'll—

Anna threw her arms around Janey's waist and cried, Poor Mommy! Battle lines had appeared; the kids were standing with Janey. At the new house they could have rabbits. There was a tree-house. At the new house we had unlimited water instead of an unreliable well; they could shower and play in the sprinkler. At the new house Janey promised we'd set up a TV just for them in the basement. They could walk to town. Anna blinked at me and said, Daddy, you should talk.

Janey detached Anna's arms and walked out. Then she came back and wrenched a cigarette from my pack.

Up yours, she told me.

When I met Janey in 1972 she was a girl, only nineteen. I believed she was beautiful. I thought everything of mine was safe with her. I believed I wouldn't find another girl like her. Finally bravely, warily, I asked her to marry me. When she said no the rejection sent me away burping like a muffler. She owed me marriage. I'd told her secrets, how my mother died and my father turned all his years to stone. How I'd grown up precipitously, taken on the cooking and cleaning while he sat staring at walls or my mother's flowers till my rebellion set in when I was fourteen. How he rallied then; how I still despised him for having shown me he was weak. I felt cheated by Janey's No, no thanks Bob, but really Bob, thanks for asking. I couldn't stop myself from lashing out and I phoned her parents and told them Janey'd had an abortion; I told her boss at Eaton's that I'd seen a silver necklace she'd stolen. I called her apartment and breathed heavily into the phone line. It took another three long years to woo her back, five

to retrieve from her a yes. She married me at last when I was convinced I was such a shit I didn't deserve her.

My father loved her. At the wedding Dad took me aside and said he didn't understand how I'd managed to snag her and I felt pride, silly, stupid, garish pride. But after we moved west and the two of them closed ranks, I resented things, how easy it was between them, how Janey seemed always to please him no matter what she did. Their rapport. Janey loved his island. Me? I'd left it and stuck a thumb east. Janey let the names of the flowers in Dad's gardens—hibiscus and rhododendron and clematis and hydrangea—sink inside her tongue while I, I'd spent my adolescence breaking curfews and yelling that he couldn't bring my mother back by caring for her damn stupid plants. Once I uprooted Mom's prize rose bush, doused it with gasoline and set it on fire. Janey cared for the same kinds of things Dad cared for: landscaping, small town hellos at the post office, families with heritage, families who could trace their ancestors back to the first islanders. While really I didn't know what I cared for. The twins? Staying alive? I was not as simply contented and therefore watched them with a kind of suspicion, as if their easy pleasures hid caves of malice. I did not believe in them.

When the move was over, when the old place was emptied and the new place full, and we were driving the cleaning supplies and vacuum, the last bits and pieces, to Dad's, Janey was carrying a lily in her lap, a gift. Her own plants were mostly cacti, tall saguaros and dumpy moldish ones together in low clay pots, but she knew Dad coveted flowers and she'd made me drive to town to the florist's.

She put it proudly in Dad's arms. For letting us stay.

Dad stared at it for the longest time and at Janey. Then he turned to me and said, his voice aching, Your mother had a prize lily when you were a baby.

He frowned and thought a moment, said, You uprooted it when you were two.

I took it like a slap.

Janey, he said, I believe it's going to bloom.

My wife smiled beatifically.

The flowers come up quick, Dad said. On long stalks. One, then another. Two trumpet blooms, probably orange. They come up so quick you think it's got to be possible to see them grow.

Janey looked at Dad with delight. It is? I mean, you can really see them?

Don't know, he said. Never tried.

Let's, she said.

Dad said, Look. See here? See that bud on this one? That's a bloom about to pop.

He carried it inside to the trunk he used as a coffee table. They sat together on the couch and I left them, going outside to empty the car, wandering around the gardens, wandering back in to stand in my old room with its hockey pennants and basketball trophies. We'd brought the kids over earlier. It was after eight; Gray was sprawled asleep on my old bed and I looked at him, my son. I didn't feel like his father, not that potent or big. I went and checked Anna on the divan in the basement; I went to look in the guestroom, my mother's old sewing room with its twin beds made up for us. I overheard Dad and Janey, I heard exclamations:

I saw it. Grant, did you see it move?

I swear I did too Janey. I did see it.

By the time eleven o'clock came the lily carried one tall, green stalk and two opening flowers, orange gilded with green, with white-headed stamens on orange stems curled upwards inside them. It threw its flowers to the side, one, two. Janey and Dad sat holding hands on the couch, pleased with themselves.

Join us, Janey told me.

I rifled in the fridge for beer, annoyed at their pleasure, pissed off at everything, this move. Being at Dad's. Having to move to Martha's.

She'd said. Once Martha she'd—

Is that you sweetie?

It was weird. I stood in Dad's kitchen and saw myself, twelve years old with puny shoulders, walking Martha's hall in my sneakers. I smelled of wet cut grass; I saw clods of mud falling off my shoes. I had a bouquet of hydrangeas in one hand. I felt pride, they were flowers from Martha's favourite bush.

Come in here honey, Martha called.

The bathroom door was beige.

Now I popped my can of Bud and sat in Dad's chair across from the sofa watching him and my wife like they were a soundless movie. I thought about Martha and George, things I remembered like Martha being older than my mother, with her kids grown and gone. How George was sick in bed, dying of cancer. How Martha hired me to do odd jobs; cut the grass and repaint the porch and prune the apple trees and wash George's Chevy. And memories, unexpected memories about that day.

George heard me in the hall and called, Martha? Martha, that you?

I'd stopped, my sweaty hand wrapped around the bathroom doorknob.

Come on now, Martha called through the door. Come on Bobby, I won't bite.

I'd pushed the door open. The paint was cool against my flat palm. Inside, it was humid, misty, hot. My throat was tight. I swallowed and swallowed.

Ma'am? I couldn't look; I'd watched my reflection in the vanity mirror instead.

There you are, she said. Come here now and close the door behind you. Don't mind George, he couldn't bother the dead.

Smells. It smelled. Bubble bath? Martha, old Martha who must have been near fifty then, was in the white tub with a kerchief around her head, a flowered kerchief; her fingers moved the water.

C'mere, wash my back, honey. I can't reach. She held the sponge out, dripping on the mat. The skin under her arms was baggy.

I shut the door, listened for the knob catching, put the flowers beside the sink, crossed to the tub, got down. The bath mat bulged under my knees. I had an erection I tried to hide. I took the sponge.

There'd always been something different about our relationship. I'd felt older in her company; I'd felt tall, like a man. After my mother died, Dad was so—empty, dark. Hard. I watched him now with Janey, listening to her decorating plans, how she'd plant more wisteria along the side of the garage and what did he think about putting Gray downstairs, that damp and low-ceilinged bedroom? Dad had a light to his eyes. I thought how I'd once used Martha as an excuse to get away from him, any excuse to be gone, to escape, to be somewhere, anywhere else than around him. I'd felt grown up; I thought I could be an adult if Dad couldn't, I could be head of the house.

Martha'd twisted so her back was to me. Whiskey, I'd smelled whiskey, wet whiskey.

Go on, she'd said.

I remember I raised my arm and touched the sponge to her back. There were angry marks dug into her shoulders, bra strap marks. Her back was long and I felt each rib, a bump under the sponge. One two three four ribs. Her spine. Freckles. Martha had freckles down her back. I moved the sponge, felt cool water dribble down my arms, watched water cascade down her back and goose bumps raise on her arms.

Mmm, she'd said. Mmm, that feels so good.

I dipped the sponge to warm it and dotted at her back, hardly touching it, between her shoulder blades. Tendrils of her hair coiled at her neck out of her scarf, sodden. Grey hair.

Lower, she said. Do my whole back honey.

I moved the sponge lower, over her ribcage, swiping it. Martha straightened. She had no distinguishable waist but I followed her move-

ment, sponging lower, filling the sponge with soap, dipping the sponge and reapplying it.

How's that little girlfriend of yours? she'd finally asked. That's nice, there, yes, good. That feels good.

I'd cleared my throat. I couldn't think of anything but my erection almost poking out my shorts, how neat it was to be in there with her, how gross it was.

Martha moved in the tub, squeaking. She rose onto her knees and held a thin and too small white washcloth over her breasts. She turned her back. I sponged her, slow and silent.

We heard George. Martha? Martha?

I dropped the sponge, bolted back and hit my shoulder on the basin cabinet. It hurt for days after. Martha'd leaned and snatched my wrist. Never mind him, she said, he can't get up. She held my hand with both of hers, spongeless, and then moved it through the wet air to cover her left breast. She cupped it and smoothed it. Her skin was damp and warm and the nipple was hard and huge, like a raspberry poking my palm.

You know I love you, she said. She moved my hand and held it lower, over her thistly pubic hair. She said, Haven't I always taken good care of you?

Now I finished my beer and got up leaving my wife and father alone to talk about which of my shop's pieces looked promising for the house. I used the bathroom and crawled into bed. I thought about Gray and Anna, how I would feel if someone did something like that to them. I'd murder. But with Martha, it was me doing it, not her. I'd wanted to. I heard Janey coming in and getting in the other bed and I pretended to be asleep.

Janey? I said the next morning. I'd woken from a dream and light was coming in, sun. It was hard to realize where I was, at Dad's, hard to remember we were moving and that's why nothing in the room looked right. Janey was pulling on painting clothes, her grey armless sweatshirt over her small breasts, bra-less, ready to work on that house, Martha's house.

You're awake? my wife asked.

Come to bed.

The twins are up, Janey said, I hear them. She came and stood above me. I took her hand and held it.

Get up, she said. I could tell she was anxious to be at it, all the things she needed to accomplish. I knew she was rushing. I wanted to say I could go there to help, but Martha was everywhere lurking.

I tried to say.

Janey, I said, honey, Martha's in that house.

Martha? she said, squinting at me, shaking me off. Old dead Martha? she said. You haven't even been there yet. Me, the kids, the movers, the workmen, not you. How would you know anything about it? Get up for God's sake, it's nearly eight.

She's there, Janey. Don't you think she's there?

She said, A ghost, you mean? She pulled on her panties. Her sweet black patch of pubic hair went missing. She reached for her sweat pants.

I said, Not ghosts. I mean, don't you feel her? I did not know how to express what I meant. It had only ever housed Martha and George and their kids and for fifteen years only Martha. She'd died, finally, but her kids, all off-islanders, had held onto it, empty. Even on the porch, as far as I'd gotten, it exuded Martha.

Janey cocked her head. You don't mean actually? She came and sat on the side of my bed. Bob, anyway, she said, I've changed almost everything. You won't recognize it.

She used to look after me, I told her raising on an elbow.

I know, Janey said tenderly. You needed a friend.

I mean, Janey I mean, she used to look after me a lot. I ate food she cooked on that woodstove you tell me you've restored. I helped her tie the ivy you're cutting back. I plunged the toilet you replaced.

Janey said, You miss her. It's like going home, moving there.

No. I shook my head. You don't get it.

Tell me then.

I fell back and said hollowly, There's nothing to tell.

She stroked my temple. But then Anna screamed and Dad's voice boomed out. I felt Janey hesitate. I felt her attention slide. I felt it going like water through a funnel.

Gray, Janey yelled, don't you hit your sister!

Martha, I thought, Martha, Martha, don't you hit your best friend's son.

My mouth was numb. It was kissing I shouldn't have being doing. I'd kissed her long and firm, my first kiss. I'd put my tongue in Martha's mouth. I'd slid my tongue over the teeth of my dead mother's best friend. It happened. Just that truth: it did happen. She'd stood and pulled me to my feet and I'd pressed my erection into her thighs. I'd tugged down my gym shorts and I'd put her hand on me. I came as she handled me, came as George lurched into the bathroom. Fool, I thought again, it happened. I had that realization.

Janey, baby, I said, lie down with me.

She was staring off and slowly swung back to me.

Honey? I said. I was starting to cry, dry heaves down in my gut that pulled my muscles and rose. Janey? I said.

Oh Bob, Janey said impatiently. But she folded me into her arms so I was lying like an infant in her lap, my head against her breast. It was funny, what I noticed then. The hot sun on a patch on my thigh; against my back Janey's work clothes rough with spots of crusted paint.

What is it, Bob? I have work to do so tell me, okay?

But I couldn't. I only managed to say, Don't go. I was almost back in Martha's house; come was sliding down Martha's legs and I was yanking up my shorts and she was slapping my face, I was backing, trying to find a way around George, pale yellow George, old dying George. I shoved him, finally, and ran. I grabbed my bike and rode till I couldn't breathe anymore for the ache in my lungs.

Janey held me while I fought back tears. Janey kissed the top of my head and rocked me. When the twins came in she hushed them, telling them Daddy's had a bad dream. She sent them out and kept on holding me until the hard place began to melt, till Martha began to peel away from me like a husk on a corncob. In my wife's arms, she died, Martha was dying. On my wife's breast, she was crumbling.

I'd gone back. I was twelve years old and I went back to Martha's. I knocked on her back door and when she opened it she'd regarded me like a speck of dirt, a crumb, trash.

I don't want any yard work done, she said. When I cried out I hadn't meant anything she crossed her arms, a statue, said, The noise of the lawnmower bothers George.

I'll come back, I begged. Tomorrow.

Don't ever come back, she said. You're a filthy boy. Get out of here and don't you ever come back. You're not welcome here. She slammed the door.

Janey stroked my hair. There, she said, there. It's okay, whatever it is, things will be fine.

But Dad came in. Bob? He stood at the door. What's going on here? Bob? Janey? Breakfast's on the table.

Janey pulled her head up and said wearily, Go away Grant. Not now.

I was starting to shake. I held the tears in but the effort made me shake.

When Dad didn't go my wife said, Can't you see it's private? Go away, I mean it. There was a tremor in her voice, the surge of loyalties quivering and aligning.

I loved her perfectly then. I loved her completely.

Get out of here Grant, my wife said.

Dad backed out.

I said, Janey.

Janey said, It's late. It's almost eight. She patted my back and released me. Are you okay?

I want to go to the house, I said.

Bob? Janey asked, confused.

Humour me, I said.

Janey took my face between her hands and kissed my nose. We'll go after breakfast, she said, it's a date.

I was keeping this thing from Janey. I had the memory, but my shame went too deep to put words to. All I could do was go back, be there, walk in that hallway, go in that bathroom.

Janey drove. I didn't say anything and she didn't either. When she turned off the car engine, she passed me the keys. She sat watching me, waiting.

I said, Dad told me I was being childish. He took me aside before we left and chewed me out about putting you through this.

I've never yelled at him before, Janey said and took my hand. You want to go in together?

But I was staring off at a hydrangea bush Janey had uncovered since she'd first brought me here.

She followed my gaze. Pretty, she said, isn't it?

I said, That kind of bush ought to have shrivelled up and died without care.

Janey said, I just pulled the morning glory off.

I said, I picked hydrangeas for Martha from that bush.

And then neither of us said a word. I got out and Janey got out and started up the front stairs.

I threw her the keys. Let me in the back, okay? I asked. I needed to be alone. I walked around the side of the house. The chimney where I used to park my bike was crumbling; we'd need stonemasons. I walked to the back. There it was, the patio, the door, my wife opening the door.

She held it for me and I walked in.

I said, No workmen?

My wife said, Are you kidding? Before ten?

I took her hand and pulled her up the hallway into the bathroom. She was laughing. I slammed the door and grabbed Janey and kissed her.

I went on kissing her for all I was worth. It was the thing I could do.

Gabriela Pechlaner

Quickly Only

Only once and quickly my friend told me of the time
she and the others caught a small turtle.
She said it too fast for me to know why they hit him
the first time. Perhaps the hook,
hung firm in his mouth clamped shut, frightened them,
and they thought to kill their fear.
So they hit his head, hard, with a stone
smoothed round by the waves, and by the turtle's own
small ripples—but he did not die,
and pulled, instead,
the half crushed head inside his shell.
It took an hour, she said,
turn after turn, the four of them
trying to crack his shell, to complete the death
they wished they hadn't started.
I pictured the boat as she told me this,
how it would rock gently on the water like a cradle,
their nervous laughter floating across the lake
as the turtle, in his dark, bloody hole, with his one
seeing eye looked out,
the pounding coming in awkward bursts
over his back and belly.
They didn't think it would be so hard to kill him,
she said. It seemed obvious to me,
turtles being what they are, but I said nothing
and she said no more,
turtles being what they are.

Ruth Daigon

The Drowning

We keep pulling him up
from the bottom of the Red River
in stop-action or slow-motion
and replay the splash
blooming around his hips.

We correct his dive,
restore the promise
of his form, each movement
clear in the instant of falling.

The moment reversed,
we reel him up
to where he's still
sitting on the bank.

Mother covers her
bare scalp with hair
torn by its roots.

Screams sucked back
into her mouth become
soft syllables again.

Her shredded clothes
rewoven. The table set
for his return.

D. Nurkse

two poems

In The Zone Of Protected Villages

At dawn we crossed the border.
Bonfires flickered in fog.
Armed shadows patrolled the cedar.
We called our names
so they would not be startled
and they came groping toward us
and ordered us to wait.
We squatted in cold humus
while they read our papers
with deep attention and no interest,
framing each syllable
in their own language, and at last
they fumbled for their inkstamps
—the horn, the wings,
the smudged sickle moon—
and forgot us: we were inside.
We stumbled down the path
to the valley, suddenly hearing
a river and the blurred noise
of children fetching water.
When we cleared our throats
the voices froze: we could hear
a rustle as they struggled
not to cough or sob or sneeze:
we called good-bye and soon
on the far side of the soft wall
we heard corn being milled,
a clink of dice, a charanga tuning,
lumber being planed,
the scratch of a quill,
milk squirting in a metal churn,
a shears cropping wool,

and we called out.
At once there was silence
and an echo said:
we are travellers,
our papers are in order,
we will take no pictures,
and we kept walking.
We heard artillery to the north,
small arms fire to magnetic north,
then a flutter of bats
landing in the rhododendron,
the sleepy call of hidden parrots,
the bees logy in the damp,
and we came to the crossroads.
At one fork, a candle sputtered,
flaring into wind, leaning back
into flame: at the other a body lay
curled on itself and we turned it over
gently and saw the swarm
of maggots and fire ants
slithering on each other's backs,
and then we waited.
The hair of the corpse
rose and fell, the candle flickered.
Our maps showed only a straight road
to the capital. So we tossed a coin
from our former lives, worthless here,
now only yes or no,
and took the body's road
south through wild wheat.
We passed crucifixes made of twigs
lashed with bark, or scrawled in dust,
or daubed in clay, and by noon
the mist began to clear, the wheat
stood furrowed and man-high.
We heard faint songs
of harvesters, a scythe being honed,
but we no longer called,
we tiptoed south as the sun
blazed to omnipotence

and flared and set: at last
we lay down in stubble hugging each other
for warmth, and the lights of a huge city
hardened in the night sky.

Passing Through Salvador

Why do they greet you
as a friend in that city?
Among cardboard houses, paper houses,
tin can houses, palm fronds
on stilts, in the wilderness
of trenches covered with planks,
a woman is waiting for you.
She shows you her child's blue lips.
A man hitches up his trousers
and reveals the cord-welt on his ankle.
A boy points to his missing foot
under which a buried mine
will always be about to explode.
When they've finished their stories
—each a formal speech, memorized
but as brief as possible—
they wait trembling with shyness
for your verdict and you look away
desperately, lost in this city
with no roads, lights or water,
without centre or limits.
You long for a window in the airless room
where a live coal flickers in an iron pot
and a tethered crow stares
from behind a burlap screen.
At last you say, "I cannot help."
They smile then, relieved
it will be so easy to appease you,
reminding you you've already given them
your long journey to their city,
and soon you will also give them
the endless journey home.

Jennifer Salter

veterinary crucifixion

the next jesus splays out here
her mouth
pried open & apart abyss
for wheezing tubes,
mechanically delivered sleep
the promise of infertility

to this canine body
whose slippery black eyelids quiver
against eyeballs limbs have been
strung up so the spine
holds straight

each labouring thump
pumps the heart against the skeleton
to rhythms of ancient
wolf packs howling up
at white slivers of moon

digital numbers on a screen are the accuracies

the knife flickers and

filling up from inside the belly,
the uterus pops out like a pink balloon

The Land of No Odometers

Mark Anthony Jarman

I roar past my fun-house reflection in the silver line of snaking Airstream trailers, my testy car taking me from East L.A. to southern Alberta, to Jawbone Lake. There is something in deserts I respect: roadrunners with lizards dangling from beaks, doves in cactus calling coo-coo, coo-coo, that impressive collection of junked refrigerators and slot machines. I met the Intended in a salt-brush desert. Now, in the long last light of a Nevada sunset I spot tiny monsters hurtling toward my head, looping, barreling over ugly scrub and cliffs, jets protecting us in the desert. You see them well before the shrieking arrives, sense the change in our air as these metal blackbirds sweep over the unearthly lit green highway signs, streak the level desert floor, spooking the few wild horses they haven't hunted down. My Volvo runs well, this dry heat warming the car's obscure bones, arid air pushing through carbs. I pass every car on the road while the sun beats behind weird cloud cover and mad prehistoric birds rocket past the same way the racing sun seems to, visible then not visible. Young crewcut pilots hang upside down in their modified suits, their pale calibrated brains aimed at earth as they cross Hebrew-looking mountains, and I imagine arks sailing calmly over these test ranges and desert rats. I am aging quickly and I have no sanctioned profession. God has not yet given me word to build a boat, but there's still time. I possess one suit and one RRSP, a one trick pony, amusement for the cigar smokers, the wax-cup beer drinkers, I'm a rubber chicken circuit jester who travels and drinks. But what the hell! I had fun and I knew what I was getting into. Now if only I had enough NHL games for some kind of real pension. Or even get reimbursed all my moving expenses.

The lovely desert fills with mirages: water, sanity, coins in a shower of gold from a machine. Las Vegas billboards loom like giants, larger, jets like gnats circling my shorn head. My engine's valves tap into Hollywood mufflers under the Air Force's impressive alloy plumage. On the long climb east cars pull off, overheating, hoods open like mouths. Bats feed at rare blossoms as aged tourists scratch their heads and beg for water.

Two argue whether Nevada is the Silver State or the Sagebrush State. They commence clepping each other with canes. Cacti throw shadows of demented dancers, prone hills look like sleeping wives and a drunk young cowboy does softshoe in the sand and rabbit brush. He's in an old-fashioned white flatbrim Tom Mix hat, tux and tails, pants tucked inside his cowboy boots; his snakeskin boots point down like a ballet dancer and his arms are held way up, snapping his fingers. His hat tilts down, putting his gaunt scarred face in shadow. There is something in the desert he loves. He must have been immaculate the night before in his tux. I see he is blind, he has lost his eyes somewhere. (The dark and vicious place where thee he got cost him his eyes.) Just what do they do with eyes at the hospital? Into the dumpster out back, like shucked oysters? Out vile jelly. Those in science may disagree but surely an eye is more than a simple lens; it's a miniature mind, its own powers and peeves, did love you once, was the more deceived, etc. You can't just toss an organ like that into a plastic bucket on the floor, pretend it's a tennis ball that's lost its fervor. His outside women cruise the malls, just looking, thank you. I ask if he wants a ride but he says no. I give him a lime, that beautiful fruit, a can of beer. A purple hearse weaves past us going way too fast. The hearse veers into the desert toward Joshua Tree, trailing a plume of dust; Sweetheart of the Rodeo plays on my tape deck; pedal steel guitar, "You ain't going nowhere." There's a horse's skull nailed to a miner's cabin, a chalky relict. Just as the Byrds tape finishes I pull into town, pull into Circus Circus for free drinks and twenty-five cent slots. My sweaty soul hits a wall of air conditioning and neon mayhem and a man who looks like Jesus in a bad toupée buttonholes me, begs me for money for food.

Now why should I give you money, I ask. We're in Las Vegas, you'll just gamble it away.

Oh no, he says amiably, clearing up any confusion, I *have* gambling money.

In landscape this *dry* I think of my young pal Surfer Joe under all that water, riding a last zipper, a growler, a right side ripple, inside the hooks in the land of no odometers, the land of lost apostles. Surfer Joe used to fly a six-foot-four squashtail right under the piers, a jet, a blinking shadow flicking through the pilings and sharp barnacles and deadheads. He was a goofyfooter, he didn't go for the regular stance and he was killed on The Pipeline, a run he made known. Shredding breaks, mushy reform waves, slop, all the way past the crooked pier and then he slides under and an unfamiliar hand grabs his foot and holds him there a while. Just long enough. His eyes staring at me. I close his eyes. I close my eyes, I go under into intoxicated motel sleep. And each motel morning I shall be lifted (under

new management) at the white crack of noon. Check out time is eleven. No lifeguard on duty at the pool. The white wooden tower is empty. Something is telling me that Waitress X is a cul-de-sac. I climb to sudden startling views, brief meadows, then down to clanging pointless railroad crossings. I am crossing mountains of slavish taverns where the hulking jukebox plays only Sinatra, Dorsey and Husker Du and that's all right by me.

I am inside the motel pool; under pepper trees, under cayenne trees: I am underwater rising from the bottom toward the blue above the water. I see my hands reaching, rather I see their reflection while I'm underwater. It's not a hallucination; I try it again and can see a perfect mirror image of my hands, a religious image, two hands open and pointing to heaven, rising. Of course I dwell on Surfer Joe: this was his last vision. For some reason I cannot do the same trick with my face, only my hands. This is in a village in a crook of mountains, dark evergreens rising right of the highway, a snowfield above to the left, a brilliant river in a curve around us, some blue of the sky living as well in the snow, the motel pool bright as liquid metal. I am inside it.

The landscape turns and hides from me as I drive around obstacles, cliffs, through the spoked valleys. I lose direction and seem to hold the wheel in a turn of 360 degrees churning dizzyingly downhill. The wheel bends the driver. My fan belt breaks and the heat gauge goes off the map. I park under a tree and heal the fan belt with hockey tape. This gets me to a gas station, will get me to my Intended again. The grease monkeys are betting on a cockfight in one of the bays, make me sort through a heap of fan belts for my number.

I drank freezing ginger ale across the Mormon state, floating past smoking Dickensian steel mills of Utah while keeping an eye out for Marie Osmond. I never associated Utah with steel. Utah is named the Beehive State: it's refreshing, first time I've been somewhere named after a hairdo. Cops ignored my speeding in this indigo paradise or else the Volvo was invisible to Latter Day Saints. How can you be in California one day, Idaho the next? It's pretty, running just moments ahead of spring. Orchards run wild to the bank, river still moving inside winter, snow hovering in the hills. Deer are dying of black tongue disease, carried by gnats, bucks dead up in the aspens around the ugly hotel, tiny details dragging them down. I like this spacious country, these lost peaks and pillars of salt, these expansive valleys and tank towns: I can tell I'm closer to home. I'm there.

Arthropod Summer

At my Salvage King Ya! junk-yard I am ringing my modest borders with swift growing willow, so as not to offend la turista, etc. Also wild roses, patio lanterns, golden birds overhead. I am a King of Junk, King of something. I have empire, I have magnesium wheels and rare metal parts, but skip-tracers are on me like ugly on a pig.

Previous I was middle management, a bit of a con, an attendant lord swelling whatever. A grinder, a plumber, skin of teeth in a hair trigger nigger republic. Now a hunter and collector, an antiquarian with fabulous auto limbs and glass bug-eyes for sneaky sports cars. Coyotes come every night to sniff Neon's life-size papier maché dinosaur, paying homage to other ancient kings. A red rooster crows, saying, Bring your bullet nose Studebakers and three-wheeled Messerschmits, your Power Glides, hot rod Lincolns and Morris Minors. Your Borgwards from Mexico. Your Simcas. Your Desotos. Your ex-jocks. Your dinosaurs. Your hearts and fenders.

Cowboys Not Dancing

More Horse Trouble, More Horse Opera: my Ex-wife is driving my truck with her Arab stallion in the back of the truck, its front leg broken in seventeen pieces. A morning breeze rises from the valley below, cool as the lake but I like the window down, my arm out of the truck, insects bounding off skin into a dust cloud, thinking of her in our old bed still in the old house and in that skin of the climbing year these fields black, spring seed walked across fields every year rising to the sun moving north and rain falling straight, or grain falling to hail or hell or blades, another dead winter, then between clods, that sheen, green life again, every moist spring, killing and lifting whirls of wheat the colour of her hair year after rolling year living so close to her, my seed in her once, but I can't talk to her right now and think again of her favourite horse, the Arabian, broken in the back; I say nothing, but I see her glare like a god out the window at redtail hawks over hay and Charolais in a balance of sun and rain and grass. Hubcaps nailed to a jackleg fence, wood ready to collapse and bargain with the earth. Why me? she thinks. The same old question. Why does everything happen to me? She looks, sees everything.

"The Big Guy In The Sky, puzzles me," she says, "I haven't had much luck with His mysterious ways. Would you term yourself an optimist?

Why is my horse dead? Why now? Why do I have such problems with men? Why?" Why? Not a clue, haven't the foggiest. Why? No use asking that particular question. Little use asking any question. Better yet, let's pretend to ask questions. I listen as she drifts through each traffic light, faster and faster, red or green, until we are near the slaughterhouse.

"Do you believe in anything? I believe in lots. In jet-lag for instance. Homemade beer. That stuff that kills carpenter ants and only costs $4.99. Is hot desire good or bad? I used to really be fond of men. And my horse. I had hopes. Nice ass. Good legs. Now? Now it's like I'm a high rent cunt and no one can make the payments anymore. I'm in the window and I don't move. I'm nailed to the spot."

She is near tears is what she is.

"Honey, where is this damn place?" she says.

"Turn left here, can't you smell it?" A stench in the neighborhood. Do they get used to it? I hope they get a break on the rent.

"You look great, you're eminently fuckable," I say in the wrong voice.

"Don't make me laugh," she says. "This gets us nowhere, know what I mean?"

Is she on diet pills again? I still love every woman I've known, but I don't tell them. Or I do and it drives them away.

"This high rent stuff," I say, still trying. "Don't talk that way."

"Listen. Something is dead. My stupid goddamn stupid horse is dead."

"It's not dead yet." Which is true but I wish the words were back in my mouth. The leg is broken in seventeen places. She looks at me as if I am a complete idiot for about several thousand moments.

We drive. There are no coins in the fountain so to speak. There is a poachy meadow of Poland China pigs. First we go too fast and then we're going about three miles per hour on a city byway. Out of the blue she says, "The ref ejaculated him; I swear to God that's what the ass on TV said, not ejected him but ejaculated him from the game."

"You're blocking traffic," I note politely.

"Oh shut up." Her favourite phrase.

I used to say she was good looking, and she'd look embarrassed and say, Shut up. I'd say a meal was good, Shut up she'd say. What a brain, I'd tell her during Jeopardy. Shut up, she'd say, bashful.

I have to learn to say shut up tactfully. As she does.

Shut up please.

Please shut up honey.

Thank you for please shutting your big fucking trap.

Ferme le bouche s'il vous plait.

I was laying low in Fort McLeod, a small town south and east of here. I was shooting pool with a Blackfoot painter. Charlie Russell, of all people, is his favourite artist. The field of mustard is so yellow, it's like Van Gogh on acid.

"You have a big mouth, Indian," the cowboy said by the lit pool table, "a big fat mouth." This is this cowboy's version of shut up.

The Indian was Golden Gloves once, beat the cowboy outside, quieted him, shut the cowboy up. The cowboy folded up like a kid's stroller. He thought things over a while, feeling he was a man more sinned against than sinning.

Imagine us all stuck inside a space ship. "Please shut up."

"No, you shut up!"

Out you go, out the little hatch. Lost in space.

At the renderers my Ex-wife and I wait and wait in the boneyard smell until the SPCA and the schoolchildren's tour finally leaves. A backhoe bucket cradles a giant pig, a red monster in a posture of unwanted, violent death. The man leads her stallion inside. It's the only horse she cares about. He holds a .22. He comes back in a minute and hands us the empty halter.

"Done," he says.

It's their meat now: seventy cents a pound. It's gone up, was thirty-one cents the last time I was here.

There's a hot market for horsemeat on the Continent. They're killing all the wild horses in these foothills for a few hundred dollars. (Win An All-Expense Paid Trip To Europe!) They shoot them, they run them down in trucks or skidoos. Snares hang at neck level on their favourite trail, although it may be a few days before anyone gets around to checking the traps or the salt licks and locking corrals. (Happy Trails!) One day you gallop around under the breezy ramparts of the Rockies and the next day you're sausage in the City of Light.

Everywhere I go they're killing the last of the wild horses: Utah, Nevada, in the Cariboo, on the road to Bella Coola, where they compete with the domestic stock for precious pastures; on the military range around Suffield's naked plains, where the army says they're culling them for their own good; or here in the foothills west of Jawbone Lake, where my neighbours kill them for the equivalent of babysitting money. We drive out of the glue factory air of the city.

Later she's crying and I drive her the rest of the way, getting used to the soft feel of my own brakes again. Once I could... I touch her shoulder.

"Don't," she says as if I'm killing her.

"Don't what?" I say.

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know. Whatever you're going to do." I guess I have heard vaguer warnings than this.

Just past the renderers is a rainbow I refuse to think on. We drive in circles but there's no odometer so the miles don't matter.

At the cabin I decide: work, effect repairs, salvage. Must fix that sinking driveway, that sinking feeling.

I dump a load of pit-run gravel, ten yards of black evil chunks and rocks. I shovel it hard and rake it flat, shovel and rake, sweat pouring from my eyes, my yellow shirt soaked to me. I am fixing things up. It's therapy. I'm getting in touch with my inner child to make them hand over the proceeds of the paper route. My face says rictus then I see her strolling the grassy road. My Ex brings me lemonade in a metal pitcher, her confident walk back. "I knew you'd be doing something," she says, "I knew." She knew.

By the well the ground has also sunk. I shovel clay into the depression. I miss the desert, the bats at blossoms and blind dancers, the reliable mirages. The sodden lumps of grey clay make a great smacking sound landing. I'm fixing nothing. RCAF jets wander past from Cold Lake. I will dig until this is finished; I'll set up light so I can see. *See better.* In the pool in the mountains I could only see my hands, the underside of the water an imperfect mirror; I failed to see my face. "Oh no," the man in the toupée said, adjusting his face, glad to help me on this one, "see I have gambling money."

I am drifting the spade into grey matter, digging metal into some huge brain under these pitiable poplars, waiting to find a horse skull's eye sockets, a calcified memory, my separate reflections dangling on an endless convoy of stainless steel Airstreams.

Rawdon Tomlinson

Departures

After the funeral and food,
after people return to their lives,
we drive the grandparents to the airport,
manoeuvre among faceless bodies
swarming like tadpoles.

We can't speak or hear.
The silence is a piece of twine
strung invisibly between our hearts
vibrating with the dull hum
of anguish wrung dry. . .

The darkness in huge, tall windows
attracts my three-year-old and me;
I squat and she slips into my lap
among the waiting legs and feet;

we watch the planes take off,
following tiny lights into the darkness;
we find the line waiting
on the runway; we follow them up

one after another into clouds and darkness—

we know there will never be enough,
that the world will run out of planes
before we're finished;

they blink out randomly as fireflies;

we hold them up
as long as we can.

Méira Cook

two poems

in pendulum of green

at the parabola of day
in the garden's thickest
pause girl swings in pendulum of
green too deep for colour green
is sound a gush of leaves
cells fractured in light

close your eyes against the sun
watch the skin imprinted red
on the filter of your eye feel
desire deep as colour here red
is disease heatsickness home
sickness and slick unease of

love in a red country green as blood
girl rocks herself over the hump
of midday while the garden
brawls in shadow while the sun
flowers in root of eye
swing high swing low she sings

her soul's pale exile from this
bright gash of earth here fruit
and dust and snake is red
spider and tongue and nail and
word only memory is green
a garden and dies every year

last fall

late in the greengarden shadows
fatten girl peels her legs pale there
are crystals at her ears wild facets
gather a last fall of light it is
late tongue is weary tongue is

hungry

i have cut my teeth on language i am
tongue ticking with blood and lunacy
ticktock ticktock tongue pendulum
of speech of silence dingdong dingdong

night

the colour of windows blows
wide girl swings and spangles
her ears kite the stars crystal falls
listen somewhere and falls it is
late tongue leeches throat sucks

mouth

bloodful as a tick tumorous i
divide as i eat igniting the wild
wild cells to fire in flesh all the
slipped stitches unravelled in

me

in memory of girl in greengarden
swinging the black hole of her belly she
is dwarfstar now see her devour suns
swallow moons core the world and her own
heart appled to a fall picking teeth with

tongue

Contributors

George Amabile has published widely in Canada, U.S.A., Europe, South America, Australia and New Zealand. His book, *The Presence of Fire* (McClelland & Stewart) won the CAA National Prize for literature, and his long poem, "Durée", won third prize in the CBC Literary Competition for 1991.

Micheal Sean Bolton is a Master of Fine Arts student at Arizona State University. He is currently working on a book of poems entitled *God Junkies.*

Méira Cook is a graduate student at the University of Manitoba. Her first book of poems, *A Fine Grammar of Bones,* was published by Turnstone Press earlier this year.

Ruth Daigon is editor of *POETS ON.* Her poems have appeared in numerous international journals, including *Kansas Quarterly, Ms. Magazine, Tamarack Review, Sphagnum and Meanjin Quarterly.* Her latest book is *A Portable Past.* She is the 1993 winner of the "Eve of St. Agnes" National Poetry Award (Negative Capability Press).

J.A. Hamilton's upcoming book, a collection of poetry, is called *Steam-Cleaning Love.*

Coral Hull has been published in various magazines and anthologies in Australia, Canada, India, U.S.A. and U.K. She is also involved in performance poetry and has been featured in numerous venues in Australia. Her second book of poetry, *William's Mongrels* will be published by Penguin Australia later this year.

Mark Anthony Jarman is an Iowa grad, now teaching at the University of Victoria. He is author of *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern* and *Killing the Swan.* "The Land of No Odometers" is a novel excerpt.

Anne Le Dressay lives in Edmonton and teaches English at Augustana University College in Camrose. She has been published in such journals as *Ariel, New Quarterly, Prairie Fire, Arc,* and *Poetry Canada.*

Corinne Lea is a Vancouver painter, but her paintings are inspired by memories of long summer holidays spent on the prairies; memories of family and childhood and of a place where time and space are endless.

Heather MacLeod has left her home in Yellowknife to pursue her degree in Creative Writing at the University of Victoria. Her most recent work has been published in *Grain* and *Carousel.* She has two poems appearing in an anthology entitled *The Colour of Resistance* which will be coming out this winter.

Oscar Martens has been accepted for publication in *Queen's Quarterly, Event, Arc, Blood and Aphorisms* and *Prairie Fire.* His is a member of the Lap Cat Performance Poetry Troupe.

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Kato Shuson is considered by some to be one of the greatest modern poets in Japan. His verse has been anthologized in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse* and in *Modern Japanese Literature* (Grove Press).

Rawdon Tomlinson's work has appeared in *Prism International* and *Sewanee Review,* with new poems forthcoming from *Kansas Quarterly* and *Quarry.* He is the co-editor of *Nights with the Angel: contemporary poems on alcoholism and recovery.*

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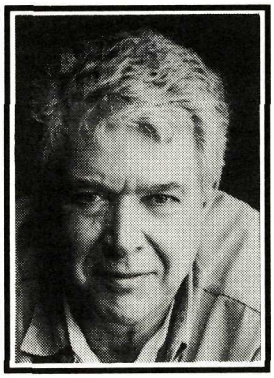

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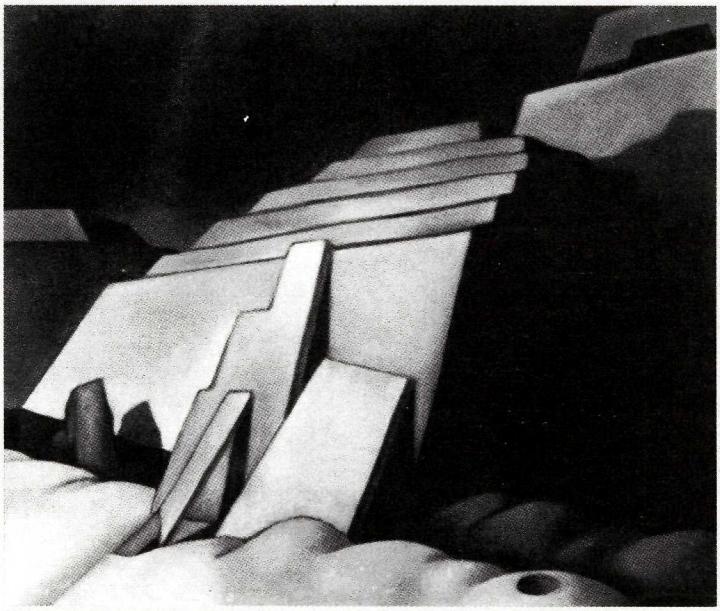

Painting, "Monument with Kerbstones," 1991 by Camille Ward. Oil on paper 14" x 16"

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In Translation

Kato Shuson

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