

PRISM international

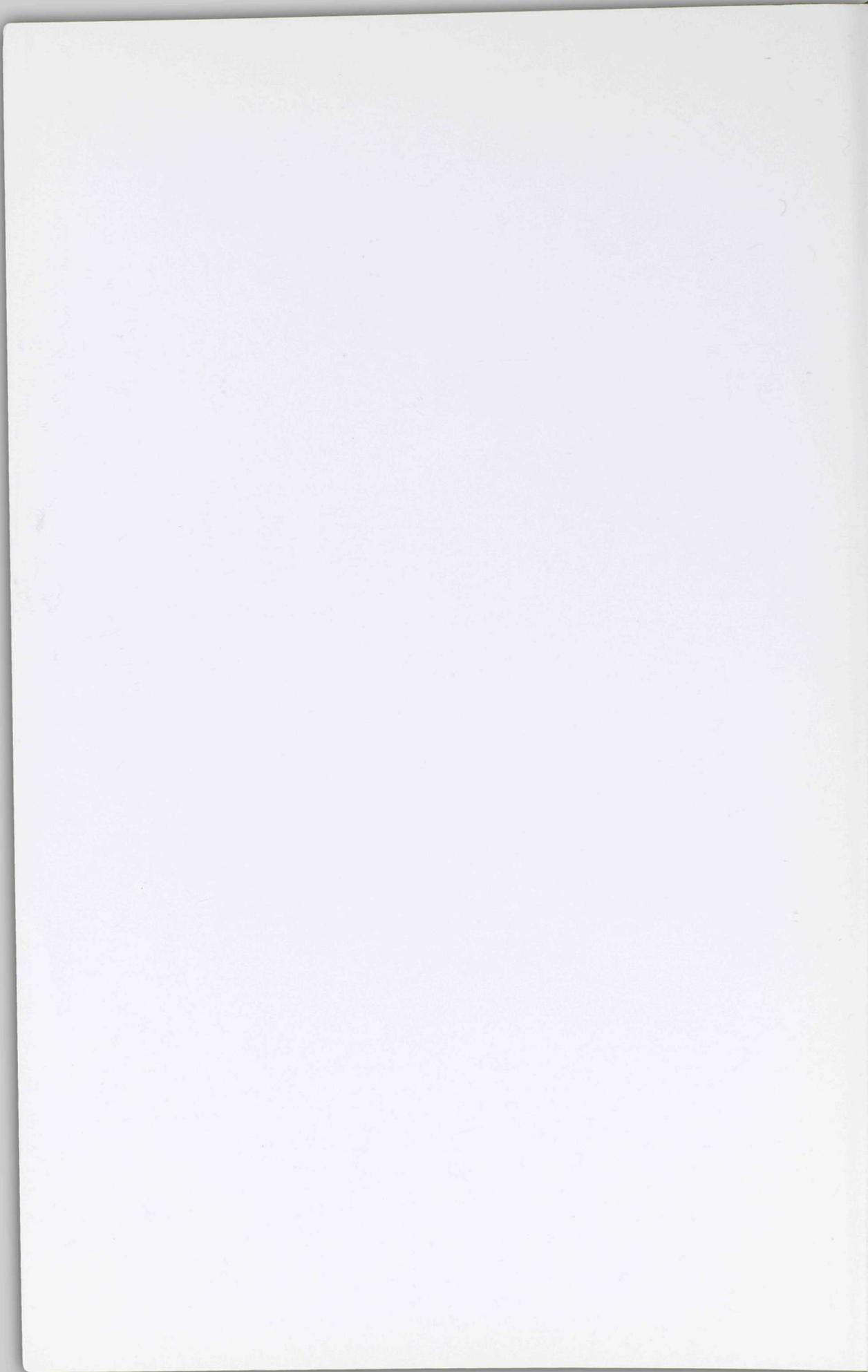
Spring 2002

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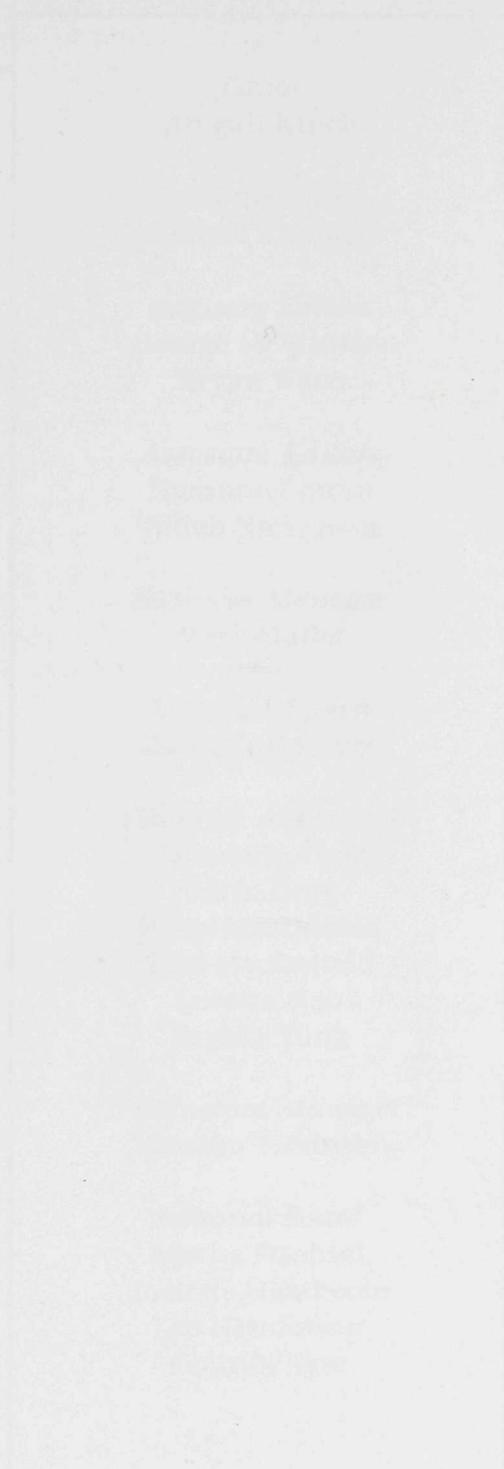
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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World





PRISM international



PRISM (mirrored bleed-through)

PRISM international

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E-mail: prism@interchange.ubc.ca
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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
SUBJECT: [Illegible]

DATE: [Illegible]

TO: [Illegible]

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Matthew Vollmer

The Last Blog¹

Friday, October 22, 2001

Intro/Adieu

Yes, it's true: I'm retiring. I know (at least I hope!) that some of you will be sad to see me go. It's been a good run, folks (THREE RAWKIN' YEARS!), and I appreciate all the email—you can't know how much your support has meant to this girl! Snaps to those who sent me dictionaries on my b-day: ya'll know I am a vocab *fiend*.

Three months after the fateful Royal Trux concert—where, at the end of their set, the drummer winged a drumstick at my head (ostensibly an accident), then asked if I would like to have a drink, which actually meant sitting backstage on a guitar case and sipping a warm PBR and being ignored for about 35 minutes—I am *back*. But I can't stay...at least not for long. Let me explain.

Rudementia

We'll begin at approximately 8:23 a.m. today, where, on the way to my cube at Ovum (for you latecomers that's www.ovumbooks.com) a man stared at me on the El. I have to admit I was asking to be noticed as I'd donned my black, knee high boots (found scrounging in the basement of Filene's, for a mere 28 bucks), and, though it was way too cold, a black miniskirt and a sheer crimson blouse (underneath my blue suede jacket, circa 1965, or so Mom tells me). Plus, I had, for once, actually curled my hair *and* applied eye shadow, lipstick, and a few remaining squirts of CK One. I was looking purty damn fine for a 28-year-old girl who, the night before at Uma's Lounge, had consumed an impossible-to-remember-amount of Jägermeister with three boys from the band Tribeca (a mop-pop tag team of DJs wielding samples, scratches, and breakbeats), all of whom were *total* hotties, and all of whom—except MC Manual, whose sad baby-fat made me

¹ From Blogger.com: "A blog is a web page made up of usually short, frequently updated posts that are arranged chronologically—like a what's new page or a journal. The content and purposes of blogs varies greatly—from links and commentary about other web sites, to news about a company/person/idea, to diaries, photos, poetry, mini-essays, project updates, even fiction."

want to squish his cheeks—knew it, especially the tall gaunt one with the noodley hair, soul patch, and Dead Kennedys T-shirt who, *somehow*, woke up in my bed this morning. Of course, this wasn't the first time Lydia Laverne Mason had gotten wasted and woken up with a boy in her bed—and though I write as if I didn't know how it happened, I know *exactly* how it happened: I asked DJ Flick, age 21 and a half, to come home with me. So I wake up this morning, nuzzle cute-boy-in-my-bed (yay!) for a few minutes, slip out of bed, and make coffee—using the scrumptious beans Mom sent from her trip to Costa Rica with Beth from her Yoga class (go Mom!), and which I save for the days when I wake up with a boy in my bed. I grab a mix tape (“all Latin, all the time” is scrawled on the sleeve, and the tape cover displays the decomposing magnificence of some anonymous Cuban cathedral), a homemade gift from my friend Sam down at the Fireside Bowl. I shove tape into stereo, crank volume to nine. I do this so Sleeping Boy will wake up and wonder where the hell he is and stumble into the bathroom where I'm curling my hair in the one black Victoria's Secret bra I own and my new black J. Crew boot cut cords (which I would later discard for current skirt). Even though we don't know each other yet, DJ Flick will pull down his Fruit of the Loom briefs—which I respect because it totally *balls* in this day and age of boxer briefs to even attempt a tight-ey whitey renaissance—raise the seat on my toilet, and pee, which, as always, will make me giggle. He'll pretend he doesn't know why I'm giggling, as, unseen by him, a few stray drops splatter the seat. “Wipe up!” I'll command, laughing, and he will, pseudo-subserviently. He'll hug me from behind, which I love, and we'll enjoy a quick romp on the sink. Afterwards, I'll whip up an omelet, and after scarfing it, he'll depart, leaving something behind, like a hat, or a guitar pick, or a ticket stub on which he'd scribbled a phone number, and I'll place it in the box where I keep Things That Have Been Left Behind, thinking someday I'm going to do something with all this stuff, but whatever I do will have to be ultra-fucking-cool, so it may be a while, or maybe never—maybe I'll end up old and stinky with a box of junk left by half-strangers in my apartment on my lap, muttering to myself: *I could have done something with my life.*

Sounds like a plan. However, Sleeping Boy does not wake up. Sleeping boy drools on Lydia's pillow as Lydia's kitties purr against him, curling up in the crooks of his body, tails swishing happily. Sleeping Boy—and kitties—apparently need rest, so I snap a photograph (the kitties are so sweet!), eat a low-fat blueberry muffin at the kitchen counter, down coffee, pop an emergency Darvocet (another gift from my dear Mother, who, as a generous physician, knows I sometimes have hangovers, and that hangovers, for a working girl, must be quickly obliterated).

On my way out, I scribble a note: “Cereal above fridge. Lock up please! XOXO.”

The Encounter

So I'm at the California stop on the El, minding my own business, watching the bright cold world slip by through fingerprinted glass, and this gorgeous man comes aboard, the kind you see a thousand times a year, with his silver coffee thermos, black messenger bag and tubed newspaper, the kind of gorgeous man you immediately forget because even though he's strikingly beautiful and fastidiously groomed, with hair oil and after-shave and freshly pressed clothes and trimmed fingernails, he's impossible to distinguish from the other fastidiously groomed gorgeous men who never look at anything besides newspapers or watches, which makes you think that their world—swarming with deadlines and quotas and secretaries—is somehow impenetrable, unless, of course, you are über-sexy-cool or can divulge information that will help them meet said deadline or quota. I'm not afraid to say that I fell into the previous category—though, as most readers are aware, I do not always believe I belong in this category, since I'm usually pressed for time, or don't care, and end up exiting my apartment ruffled and/or smeared and/or sleep-swollen, I-had-too-much-to-drink-last-night eye-bags. On the train, I usually read my *New Yorker*, scrolled into a tube, as my hair tumbles down around, thus concealing my face, to which I will not apply makeup until I reach the ladies' room at Ovum.

But today, thank Goddess, because I have pre-groomed, I catch Suit Guy glancing. And, dammit, it feels good. It feels probably better than it usually would, partly because last night I got laid, and partly because I then woke up and successfully made myself look prettier-than-usual, and now I have just had my coffee and a Darvocet and my head is tingling. Even so, I'm a little concerned about what to do with Suit Guy, who is now smiling at me, so I pull out my cell, dial a number, and begin a conversation: with myself. Is he still looking at me? *Yes*. What should I do? *You should make him want you*. How do I do that? *Ignore him*. Clicking the cell closed, I check my watch—only to notice that it's not there.

Ten minutes later—or something like that—Ms. Lydia disembarks at Michigan Ave., and tries not to look back to see if Suit Guy is following, but she can't help it, she takes a peek, only to discover that lo and behold, suit guy also rises, runs a hand through his hair, and follows. *Aww yeah*, Lydia thinks, but—playing hard to get now—*pretends she doesn't notice*, that she could really give a shit about Suit Guy, that this kind of thing happens every day, and not only could she *not* be more used to it, but it's becoming a little annoying. Of course, this kind of thing does *not* happen everyday, and Lydia, revelling in the attention, gets an idea. If he's following her—and she has no concrete evidence that he *is*, not yet—how far would he go? She smiles, and when she passes her building—the ugly one not the one with the fabulous clock and spirals to the left or the Frank Lloyd Wright one on the right—she keeps on movin'.

Reminiscence

Okay, flashback time: those of you who've been reading this blog for the past year and a half can skip onto the next paragraph—but ya'll new people, step thisaway for sum background info, most of which concerns one Thorsten Jennings Paulsen, another tall, gaunt, blonde-haired boy who was, at one time—or so I supposed—*the one*. We met on a return flight from one of the Ovum Winter Retreats in Aspen, where (and I have to say this) I actually bought Susan Sontag a drink—a voda tonic with lemon—and we discussed (seriously!) the fine pleasures of downhill skiing. I was feeling good on the plane that day, too, thanks to the two Southern Comfort and Cokes I'd downed before liftoff. Damned if Mr. Paulsen (as I now refer to him) wasn't jaw-dropping *fine*, and damned if we hadn't gone to high school in the same town, roller skated at the same rink, even bought Pixie Stix at the same shitty mini-mart. After another drink (Mr. Paulsen was having scotch, neat—*cool*), Mr. Paulsen and I were practically snuggling. Two nights later, he was in my bed. After a month, we were already strategizing: we could be that very hip, very young, famous couple at your local liberal arts university: writing novels, teaching workshops, shaking up the fuddy-duddy Lit geezers by granting dramatic readings of Hunter S. Thompson and Anaïs Nin in the undergrad lounge, throwing mini-raves in our backyard, showing up to class a little drunk or stoned, flirting with our students but no matter what—staying *true* to one another. However, just six months ago, Mr. Paulsen telephoned to say he needed time to himself, time alone to think and write, because if he didn't his work would perish. I was, and probably still am—in the centre of what counts as me—completely devastated. I'd promised to love him forever, and now, even though I wanted to hate him, I couldn't. After all, Mr. Paulsen's the reason I have my kitties (he rescued them from behind a Laundromat), the reason that I love Eastern European folk music, and, perhaps most importantly, the reason I didn't abandon "Anti-Belle," my memoir about growing up wealthy and Southern, two parts Baptist and one part pagan, with two ex-hippie physician parents who, in their spare time, garden and drive Miatas, and whose clean, mannered, logical, and gourmet sensibilities drove me to drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll. Mr. Paulsen and I promised we'd always be friends, and on a couple of occasions discussed working things out—after we'd got trashed and accidentally slept together. But that was before his novel, "How the Living Die" was accepted by AutoHorse Press. (Auto-Horse! Even now I seethe.) In an instant, he was a small time Lit-celebrity, with everything I'd ever dreamed about having: the swanky cocktail parties, the book tour, and, most importantly, the hardback with raised print and a collage of old-school tombstones. I tell people it's not *all* bad: I make an appearance in the novel—disguised as a self-indulgent indie-rock queen, I'm the bitch who breaks his heart. A few weeks after the book release, I saw him at

Gino's, feeding artichoke pizza to his agent/fuck-toy Samantha Richards, a girl with whom I'd attended the Art Institute. I exited stage left, ran home, cried through two boxes of Puffs Plus, and ripped up and crushed an armload of photos into a maroon Saucony shoebox, which, someday I will light aflame and set sail on Lake Michigan, saluting the homemade sloop as it sinks.

Continuation

Okay, that way-too-long-digression-meant-to-contextualize-the-significance-of-the-present is now over, so flash *forward*. Back to the Suit Guy, still following me, 15 paces behind.

I walk quickly, more gracefully than I know how, and realize my new-found confidence must have something to do with the boy from last night—*yeah, girl, you still got the goods, stop yo whinin'!* My blood's pumpin'. I'm lightheaded. I'm walking the street like a runway. I'm tempted by the thought of an OJ and an egg sammy at Au Bon Pain but then I think, no, what I need right now is a *drink*, and I want Suit Guy to join me. I keep on walking. You would think a Regular Suit Guy Who's Used to Getting What He Wants would've yelled something by now, or have sped it up a little, but no, this guy's taking it slow. Maybe he's followed women before. Maybe he has his own time-tested methods. Maybe he's not really a man in a suit going to work but a man in a suit going to work *on his next victim*. Okay, so that gives me a chill, but then I think, this is broad daylight in downtown Chi-town, my town, and if that's his plan, I'll give him a goddam run for his money.

Allure

At Mortimer's Saloon, I order a screwdriver. Suit Guy enters, sits down beside me on a duct-taped barstool. "You're quite a walker," he says. His voice is deep and a little worn, and I love it already.

"Excuse me?"

"I mean I was watching you walk and you do it really well."

"I practice a *lot*," I say, doodling with my finger on the condensation of my glass.

"Do I know you?"

I tilt my head. "Come on now, you can do better than that."

"Sorry. I really thought you looked familiar."

"Lydia? Lydia Mason?"

Suit Guy frowns, then shrugs. He can't come up with anything. "I'm Dave," he says. Dave. *Of course* Suit Guy's named Dave.

I bet you're thinking, great. Dave's pretty, but he's all about some mutual funds and third quarter earnings. He owns an apartment with high ceilings and wood floors and a view of the city, but it's totally sterile:

slippery leather recliners and slim televisions, and rocks out to Hootie, Puff Daddy or, when he's feeling romantic, Celine.

Thankfully, this is not your average Dave. He's—I kid you not—Dave *Wenig* who, as many of you know, plays bass in *The Slaves*—the exact *same* Dave Wenig who I'd interviewed for *Smack* magazine two years ago. I totally did not recognize him.

"I cut my hair," he says. "And I might've had a goatee before."

"What are you doing in that suit?" I ask, fingering the lapel.

"Temping," he says.

"Holy shit."

"Yeah," he says. "It *sucks*."

"You clean up nice," I say. Get this: he blushes. I want to tousle his hair but he's obviously spent some time arranging it—making it look very styled from far away and a tad messy from close up. I'll have to save tousling for later. You can't do everything on a first date.

Vocation

On the way back to work, three annoying things happen: a piece of trash—a cheeseburger wrapper—blows into my face, a fat guy with socks on his hands jogs past me and farts, and a woman in a Jeep Cherokee flips me off when, because *I have the right of way*, I try to cross Michigan Avenue. But I don't care. I'm buzzed from the screwdriver and Dave and I have a date for vanilla cokes and garden burgers tonight at Ray's Diner, a perfect spot since he—like me—lives not so far from Wicker Park.

When I come to my building, The Torso on a Skateboard Guy, sporting his parka like a failed flotation device, is out front, and for once I don't resent the sight of his grimy teeth—I smile back at him. Sometimes I flip him a quarter or two, but today I reach into my jacket pocket and toss him *everything*—ticket stubs, coins, a few crinkled up bucks, half-crushed Altoids, and a free coupon for a Mocha Shake at Rachel's Non-Dairy Cafe, which is a stupid thing to give away because those shakes fucking *rock* and the Torso on a Skateboard Guy is most likely not going to scoot all the way into Wicker Park to slurp down a non-dairy low fat mocha shake. But it doesn't matter. I'm feeling generous, and because generosity is not often my forte, it needs exploiting.

In the Ovum offices, I get *no* work done. There's not much to do except piddle with a new draft of my interview with Sadie Jones, who, during our interview, wore crimson lipstick and a black dress like a slip and who, I swear to God, in between questions, was *hitting* on me: asking to look at my rings, stroking my hand with her thumb, and smelling my hair (she loves *Aveda* conditioner). Sadie Jones (for those of you not in the know), just published what's sure to be the Book of the Year for About a Million People—a book for which I wrote descriptions you'll read in magazine

advertisements across Our Fair Land. Our *New Yorker* ad (I've been published there!) reads, "In *My Father the Devil* Ms. Jones recounts, with pinpoint accuracy, the sensual and devastating details of life with an alcoholic father. A sexually ambiguous romp through South Texas slums, pools, bars, and hotel rooms, this story will reach through your life-sludge and squeeze your heart till it bleeds." Not my best—but it *works*.

By the time I make my daily list (*pick up a Tribune and Spirits, clean up after DJ boy*—who you know did not clean up his breakfast bowls before he fled—*shower, shave legs*), and after I cut and paste some text in the Jones interview, fiddle with the font (I settle on Helvetica), and check Hotmail, it's lunchtime. Although I should go down to the Atrium to snag one of those fly Thai salads that Richie Valens (dude has the LaBamba look down to a T) fits so beautifully into a transparent plastic cube (aesthetically pleasing AND mobile), I don't. Instead, I crush up and snort three Ritalin (sorry, Mom, if you're reading this, I know you're against me snorting my pharms), which, of course, has me jonesing for a smoke—American Spirits, yellow soft pack—when Shiela, my boss yells, "Lydia come quick!"

"Where are you?" I ask, peeking over my cube.

"The breakroom!"

Breakroom Horror

In the breakroom, on the little Magnavox from 1987, I immediately recognize the scene: it's a building from my neighbourhood—in flames.

Terror strikes again, though it's not terror in the biggest city in the world, nor is it terror from the Middle East—the kind of premeditated terror that originates from a serene (and flat-out *handsome*) turbaned man with a long beard. It's *accidental* and *random* terror—an Act of God in my own *fucking* neighbourhood. It's terror right across the street. Apparently, the news lady says, a furnace exploded. Miraculously, no one was killed, though a few sustained minor injury. There's footage of a Hispanic lady—who I recognize—with a towel around her head, and axe-wielding firefighters trudging through knee-high black ash. Glass shimmers like chunks of broken crystal on the street. I wonder if other buildings were damaged and I pray—yes, I actually whisper something that resembles a *prayer*—that Sleeping DJ Boy escaped without harm. As I stare at the screen, into the soggy, charred orifice into which firemen shoot streams of bright, white water, I remember *the events of 9/11*, and I imagine what would happen if something terrible—something unspeakable—happened to *me*. I imagine the furnace in my building—the very *thing* designed to keep us warm and cozy and protected—exploding. I imagine flames licking away my treasures: my record collection (Lou Reed! Ray Davies! Ryan Adams! Emmylou Harris! Astrud Gilberto! RUN! Save yourselves!), my books (with significant marginalia, of *White Noise*, *High Fidelity*, and *The Liar's Club*), the photographs of the

Lone Star Rodeo in Cody, Wyoming and the Andrews, NC Little Miss Beautiful beauty contest, both of which I have been meaning to submit to about five documentary contests. I remember the portraits of all my friends I've done over the years—Leo, the dishwasher from the Anteater, in his van with Sally, his boa, curled around his neck; the time-elapsed photo of Stuart, wet hair dangling in his face, painting orange swirls with a cigarette; the scrapbook I fashioned of a trip to Quebec with Ethan. I imagine the aforementioned flames scorching my kitties. What little of breakfast I ate is planning a comeback.

Reflection

I've done absolutely nothing, I realize, to safeguard my life. Meanwhile, the chaos keeps creeping closer. The gentle finger of chaos has touched down more than once in my general vicinity. There was that accident—from which I was about three inches away—with the Mexican family's Odyssey crumpling into the Econoline, a bald (and very lucky) chubster unconscious and bleeding upon his deployed airbag; then, a coupla days later, the homeless man who threw himself in front of the El, upon which I was riding (I distinctly remember feeling something—a little jolt—and wondered *what the hell was that?*); and, finally, the crack lady with the knife who threatened, from the other side of the parking lot of *Supermercado*, to cut me up if I didn't relinquish the gloves on my hands, which she claimed were hers.

Sheila places a hand on my shoulder. "Lydia, if you need to take the rest of the afternoon off..."

"That's okay," I say, returning to my cube. But then, as I rip off hangnails with my teeth, I decide I can't work, and slip away.

Redemption/Accident

When I get back to my neighbourhood, there're still police cars and fire trucks aplenty (plus a WXYZ News Van), yellow CAUTION tape like a fluttering party ribbon, and lumpy officers shouting directives, whispering surreptitiously into walkie-talkies. Tendrils of black smoke escape the windows of the building, and the wind has trash to lift up to the trees. I slosh through ankle-deep puddles of refuse and water (I'm glad for my boots), towards the shore of my building. The whole way there, I'm thinking *photo op*. I could shoot up *at least* 16 rolls of film right now, I think, and turn to run up the stairs. But then, on the third step, I find something that melts my heart: a baby shoe. A tiny teeny little baby shoe: white Adidas, with only a few scuffs. Where, I wonder, did it come from? Propelled by the explosion, did it fly across the street and land here, like a puzzling gift for someone (like me) to discover? Did it fall from the sky? Did someone drop it? Or had it been discarded by the fussy baby her/his-self? I imagine

a baby somewhere in the world with only one shoe, then I imagine all the babies in the world with no shoes. My nose starts running. I pick up the shoe. So light. So *tiny*. I was once that tiny, I think. The firemen, the lumpy policemen, ripe as sausages, the skinny black dude with the backwards Cubs cap: they *all* used to be this tiny. I realize I have been blessed with something profound—a rarity, as you all know: in the face of destruction, of our eventual demise and annihilation, are we not ALL tiny? Yes. We are. For a second, I want a tiny thing of my own to hold and protect and buy tiny shoes for. For a moment I realize that there is a chance, a very tiny chance, that I might have something, right now, inside me, and that maybe I should save the shoe—so I slip it into my coat pocket.

Reverie

Inside, the Sleeping Boy is still sleeping. I can't believe it. There is no breakfast mess, no evidence that he's even gotten out of bed—the bedroom's all tomb dark and stale air—and I shiver and think: *maybe something inside him has gone wrong*. Something silent and simple has happened, and he'll never wake again. But then I touch his arm, and he flinches, and he looks so cute there with all his bedhair and his scruffiness and the pillow marks on his cheek, and because I can't resist, I join him. Lying there, my body shudders gratefully. I cradle the baby shoe against me. I put my nose in the tiny hole. The smell—a trace of baby feet—makes me want to dash to my computer and fill screen upon screen with words. I make a decision: not only will I document every moment of this day, afterwards, if successful, I'll retire from Blog Kingdom. I need to move on. I need to finish "Anti-Belle". I need to get my shit *together*, and though it's been fun, you can't exactly blog your way to the top. I scoot closer to the Sleeping Boy, because I know that in a few minutes he'll probably wake up and say something like *shit, what time is it? I can't believe I slept all day; I had the weirdest dreams, and I gotta bolt*. I won't try to stop him, either. I'll watch him put on his clothes, and bid him farewell.

But now, I press my nose against a slightly sweaty, Sleeping-Boy-neck, and wonder, as I inhale, what he'll leave behind, though I really don't care, because in a little while, I'll be sipping a vanilla coke and staring into the green eyes of one of the *The Slaves*, and we'll eat our garden burgers with feta and sun-dried tomato spread on a whole wheat bun, talking, in between bites, about the weather, movies and music, then the furnace, the fire, and the closeness of today's devastation. As we talk, it'll seem like, at least for a moment, everything will be okay. But you guys know me. Just when I think everything is fine, something happens, and I'm drowning in the sludge of all the bad decisions I've ever made. Even sludge has its merits, though—hey, if it's material, it's *material*—and if I can keep resurfacing, just enough to breathe, I expect to survive.

In fact, let me leave you with a directive. In a few months, or a year (if you haven't forgotten me by then), do a search for my name on the Internet Search Engine of Your Choice (I'd Google myself). If you get a slew of hits with my name, please follow the links: surely one will lead to a hardback of "Anti-Belle," with the option of adding it to your shopping cart. If all that you get when you enter my name is this archived blog, write me an email. Say something like: "Dear Lydia, what the hell are you waiting for? Get going, girl! There are people—fans even!—who are hungry for good words. You know that you got what it takes. You know you do. So get the lead out, keep it real, and *write*, dammit."

Rock on, all ye that are hungry. Rock *on*.

Nancy Mattson

Girl Baby

Babies should not be born in corridors,
but a teenage girl in labour can endure,
in 1964, whatever uniforms dictate:
a different set of rubber fingers
up her public rectum every quarter-hour,
measuring dilation. Numbers announced
in loud centimetres to every passer-by.
Let the patient hide behind eyelids.
When she reaches eight, she gets a labour room.
Awkward as a calf, a student nurse
slips in—they were schoolchums once,
but in this place no one tells you how.
The girl asks the girl to hold her hand.
Contraction is one word they know,
when a strong one comes they forget
to breathe, all they can do is grip.
Wheel her into delivery, it's time:
lights, action, doctor, stirrups, noise.
Pain, colours, something something pain
something music, yes, and someone prayed—
light was voice was God was saying
let them both survive. A girl baby,
all dark hair, settled on my chest.
For seven days a further blur of fevers,
fluids, stoppages, indignities;
one nurse had a beak and claws.
But the doctor was attentive,
the Grey Nuns gentle and French.
Hail Mary, full of grace, bon jour.

Virgil Suárez

Gestures My Parents' Friends Made Famous After the Revolution

Walking into the room, half asleep, where my parents
received late night visitors, and seeing the men smile
as though a spotlight had been aimed into their eyes.

Or some women passed a finger over their painted lips,
in zipper fashion, to signal an appropriate pause
to the conversation. For a child this all seemed weird,

out of order, as if each of these adults had learned mime,
each becoming almost as gifted as Marcel Marceau,
the famous French mime fallen silent and still forever.

The flutter of hands in animated conversation spoke soft,
hushed as if the secret police were about to storm the room
at any second. I've always been attracted to silence myself,

how the body finds form in non-speech, moving limbs
slowly, maybe a nervous tic or two. My father, expert,
at eye language, always let my mother know his moods

with a mere glance, a black rusty nail driven through old wood, splintering on its way. This, I realized years later, is the language of paranoids, of men and women dragged

from their beds in the middle of the night by forces greater than their plotting. To say: "*you have the wrong person,*" makes no difference. To say: "*I am innocent.*" Helps little.

We gathered in candle-lit rooms in Havana blackouts to plot our escape, one hand crossing the map of our exiting, another touching the soft back of a woman's hand, warm, as still

as a frightened hurt squirrel about to get run over by a car. One body moving toward another in the dark. I learned to approach all my lovers this way, with a Bengal tiger's stealth.

Walking into a dark room, a man, a woman, a language of the lost about to be spoken by their bodies. Touching as they go, seeing with our fingertips, the way the dying must.

Don Malo Catches a Red-Throated Sparrow

After the revolution he stopped saying the word “*rojo*.”

Red, and the idea of such a luscious colour returned every night like a silken sheet and covered his face, body, this crimson tide that made his breath hot. Some nights when he couldn't sleep, he lay awake and stared out his room window at the moon. He remembered how his mother told him he'd been born under a shadow of red moon. That he'd always have an affliction to this colour, and now, in his ripe old age, he weeps when he thinks of the colour when he cuts himself slicing yucca to deep fry big chunks of it for lunch. These days a red-throated sparrow has been visiting him in the patio, *mi mensajero del amor*, as he calls the bird. *What brings you to me?* He thinks. From the first day he spotted the bird he's been thinking of catching him and caging him in the bamboo cage where he'd once kept a *tomeguin*. Keep it caged and maybe it'd sing when the moon turned red, or perhaps it'd bring him back the memories of loves

he shared with a couple of women years ago, then faded.
But the bird refuses to be caught, or fooled by ground
corn bits on the floor under the cardboard box propped
up with a twig and string he could pull when the bird
hopped underneath it. But the hours go, and he likes it
like this, the way a man will sit and wait for love to return.

No more chasing red dreams, he wonders. *No mas amores*,
saying *aqui, aqui, aqui*. He placed milk-sopped bread
in the cage, and the bird found a way in, but when he'd
come close, the bird would fly out, cut across the expanse
of yard like a drop of blood and perch on the clothesline.

A breeze ruffled its feathers. Mr. Malo's heart raced there
too. The only way to possess such a creature was to shoot
it and hold it in his hands, but he didn't want to do it like
this. Besides, this much he knew: he was an old man,
and love might never come back, and this was fine with him.
At night he'd dream of a red sea in which all things drowned.
The red-throated sparrow sang to him to plunge in after it.

Amanda Ngozi Adichie

The American Embassy

She stood in line outside the American embassy in Lagos, staring straight ahead, unfolding her arms only to wipe an occasional tear before it crawled down her cheek. She was the 48th person in the line of about 200 that trailed from the closed gates of the American embassy all the way past the smaller vine-encrusted gates of the Czech embassy. She did not notice the newspaper vendors who blew whistles in her ear and pushed *The Guardian*, *The New Nigeria*, and *The Vanguard* in her face at the same time. Or the beggars that held out enamel plates, or the ice cream bicycles that honked. When the man standing behind her tapped her on the back and asked, "Do you have change, *abeg*, two tens for twenty naira?" she started. She stared at him for a while, to focus, to remember where she was, before she shook her head and said, "No."

The air around her hung heavy with moist heat and buzzing flies and anxiety. It weighed on her head, made it difficult to keep her mind blank. To keep her mind as blank as possible was the only way to keep her sanity, Doctor Balogun had said yesterday. He had refused to give her any more tranquilizers because she needed to be alert for the visa interview. To keep her mind blank was easy enough to say, as though it were in her power, as though she invited those images of Nnamdi's plump body crumpling before her, the splash on his chest so red she wanted to laugh and tell him not to play with the palm oil in the kitchen. Not that he could even reach up to the shelf where she kept oils and spices, not that he could unscrew the cap on the plastic bottle of palm oil. He was only three years old.

The man behind her tapped her again. She jerked around and nearly screamed from the sharp pain that ran down her back. Twisted muscle, Doctor Balogun had said, his face awed that she had sustained nothing serious after jumping down from the balcony.

"See what that *yeye* soldier is doing there," the man behind her said, pointing.

She turned to look across the street, moving her neck slowly. A soldier was flogging a bespectacled man with a long whip that curled in the air before it landed on the man's body. A small crowd had gathered. The whip landed on the man's face, or his neck—she wasn't sure because the man was raising his hands as if to ward off the whip. She saw his glasses slip off and fall. She saw the angry heel of the soldier's boot squash the plastic frames,

the tinted lenses.

"These soldiers think they are Fulani nomads and people here are their *muturu* cattle," the man behind her said.

He was wondering what was wrong with her, she knew, why she did not talk to anybody in line, why she let the flies perch on her hair without swiping at them, why her arms were so resolutely folded. Everybody in the visa line had become familiar from sharing the same unpleasant experience. They had all woken up close to midnight—for those who had slept at all—to get to the American embassy early enough to join the struggle to get in the visa line. They had all dodged the soldiers' swinging whips as they were herded back and forth like wayward cattle before the line was finally formed. They were all afraid that the American embassy might decide not to open its gates today, and they would have to do it all over again the day after tomorrow, because the embassy did not open on Wednesdays.

"Look at his face *sef*, the whip cut his face," the man behind her said.

She did not look because she knew the blood would be bright red, like fresh palm oil. Instead she looked up Eleke Crescent—a winding street, much like other streets in the posh Victoria Island section of Lagos, lined by embassies with lush lawns—at the crowds of people. A breathing sidewalk. A market really, that sprung up during embassy hours and disappeared when the embassy closed.

There was the chair rental outfit where the stacks of white plastic chairs—100 naira for an hour—decreased fast. There were the wooden boards propped on cement blocks, colourfully displaying sweets and mangoes and oranges. There were the young people who cushioned cigarette-filled trays on their heads with rolls of cloth. There were the blind beggars and their children, alternating praise chants in English, Yoruba, Arabic, Igbo, Hausa, when somebody put money in their plates.

And there was, of course, the makeshift photo studio. A tall man standing beside a tripod, holding up a chalk-written sign that read *Excellent One Hour Photos, Correct American Visa Specifications*. She'd had her passport photo taken there, sitting on a rickety stool, and she hadn't been surprised that it came out grainy, with her face much lighter-skinned. But then, she'd had no choice, she couldn't have taken the photo earlier.

Yesterday, she buried her child in Ikoyi cemetery and spent the day surrounded by friends she did not remember now. The day before, she drove her husband in the boot of their Peugeot 504 station wagon to the home of his friend who smuggled him out of the country. And the day before that, she didn't need to take a passport photo. Her life was normal, and she drove back from her elementary school teacher job singing along with Majek Fashek on the radio. If one of those fortune tellers who tapped on car windows in Lagos traffic to hawk a future-telling for 10 naira told

her she would have to run away to America in two days, she would have laughed. Perhaps even paid the fortune teller 10 naira extra for a wild imagination.

"See how the people are pleading with the soldier," the man behind her said. "Our people have become too used to pleading with soldiers."

She wished he would shut up. It was his talking that made it even harder to keep her mind blank, free of Nnamdi. She looked across the street again: the soldier was walking away now, and even from this distance she could see the superior glower on his face. The glower of a grown man who could flog another grown man if he wanted to. Was she imagining it or was it the same glower one of the men had had two nights ago when they'd broken the back door open and barged in?

Where is your husband? Where is he? They tore open the wardrobes in the two rooms, even the drawers—she wished she had told them that her husband was over six feet tall, that he could not possibly hide in a drawer. Three men in black trousers. They smelled of alcohol and pepper soup, and much later, as she held Nnamdi's still body, she knew that she would never eat pepper soup again.

Where has your husband gone? Where? They pressed the gun to her head, and she said, "I don't know, he just left yesterday," standing still even though the warm urine trickled down her legs.

One of them, the one with the green beret who smelled the most like alcohol, had eyes that blazed red. He shouted the most, kicked at the TV set, shred some papers on the table—tests she had been correcting. *You know about the story your husband wrote? You know he is a liar? You know people like him should be in jail because they cause trouble, because they don't want Nigeria to move forward?*

He sat down on the sofa, where her husband sat to watch the night news, and pulled her atop him, grabbed her left breast. *Fine Woman, why you marry a trouble maker?* She felt his sickening hardness, smelt the fermentation on his breath and held her breath to keep the vomit back.

Leave her alone, the other one said. The one with the white mole on his chin like a fruit seed. *Let's go.*

She got up from the sofa and the man in the green beret, still seated, slapped her buttocks. Nnamdi started to cry, to run to her. The man was laughing, saying how soft her breast was, waving his gun. Nnamdi was screaming now, he never screamed when he cried, he was not that kind of child. Then the gun went off and the palm oil splash appeared on Nnamdi's chest.

"See oranges here," the man in line behind her said, offering her a plastic bag of six peeled oranges. She had not noticed him buy them.

She shook her head. "Thank you."

"Take one. I noticed that you have not eaten anything since morning."

She looked at his face then, for the first time. A complexion the colour of roasted groundnuts, too smooth for a man. He sounded educated, even though he laced his speech with Pidgin English. Polite of him, because Pidgin English was the leveler—it was what both people who had not gone to school and people who were scholars could understand.

"No, thank you," she said. She shook her head again. The pain was still there, somewhere between her eyes. It was as if jumping from the balcony had dislodged something inside her head so that it now rattled painfully. Jumping had not been her only choice, she knew, she could have climbed onto the mango tree whose branch reached across the balcony, she could have dashed down the stairs.

The men had been arguing so loudly that they blocked out reality, and she'd believed for a moment that maybe the popping sound had not been the man's gun, maybe it had been the kind of sneaky thunder that came at the beginning of Harmattan, maybe the red splash really was palm oil, and Nnamdi had gotten in to it somehow.

Then their words pulled her back, as she stood, frozen. *It was an accident. What do you mean? You think she will tell people it was an accident? Is this what Oga asked us to do? A small child! We will have to take out the mother. No. Yes. She will tell all but if we take her, nobody to tell. No. Yes.*

She dashed towards the balcony then, tore through the mosquito netting and was out the door she had left open because of the steamy evening air. Later, after she heard the roar of the Jeep driving away, she went upstairs smelling of the rotten plantains in the dustbin where she had crawled in. She held Nnamdi's body, placed her cheek to his quiet chest. And realized that she had never felt so ashamed. She had failed him.

"You are anxious about the visa interview, *abi?*" the man behind her asked.

She shrugged, gently, so as not to hurt her shoulders, and forced a vacant smile.

"I am anxious too, but just make sure to look the interviewer in the eye as you answer the questions. Even if you make a mistake, don't correct yourself, they will assume you are lying, *sha*. I have many friends they have refused, for small-small reason."

She looked away from the man, from his earnest eyes, from his words—which were intended to be helpful, but which consumed her with a fierce anger. He sounded like the voices that had been around her: people who had helped with Nnamdi's funeral, who had brought her to the embassy, who had helped with her husband's escape. The familiar voices of people she could no longer remember.

Look the visa person in the eye, the voices had said. Don't falter, tell

them all about Nnamdi, what he was like, but don't overdo it because everyday people lie to them to get asylum visas, about dead relatives that were never even born. Make Nnamdi real. Cry. It was as though they were telling her the rules for talking to God.

"They don't give our people immigrant visas any more, unless the person is rich by American standards. But I hear people from European countries have no problems getting visas. Are you applying for an immigrant visa or a visitors?" the man asked.

"Asylum." She did not look at his face. Rather, she felt his surprise.

"Asylum? That will be hard to prove."

She wondered if he read *The New Nigeria*, if he knew about her husband. Everyone supportive of the pro-democracy press knew about her husband, knew how daring he was, how he had written that story almost four years ago about the people who pushed cocaine for the Head of State. Soldiers had carted away the entire print run of that edition in a black truck. But still photocopies got out somehow and circulated throughout Lagos, ended up pasted on the walls of bridges next to posters announcing church crusades and just-released movies.

The soldiers had detained her husband for a week, had broken the skin on his forehead with the end of a gun and even now he had the scar, the shape of an L. She had been pregnant then, and he was so scared she would lose the baby from worry that he stopped writing for the paper and accepted a temporary lecturer position at the University of Lagos until Nnamdi was born. She didn't worry too much during that period though, even when the Democratic Coalition secretary—an acquaintance of her husband's—was shot dead in his car. There was something invincible about her husband, about his square shoulders and cynical eyes and laughing mouth.

And even with this last story, that listed 45 names of people killed on the orders of the Head of State, she had not worried that much either. Maybe they would close the paper down. Maybe they would lock him up for a few days. But it would all blow over. It was not as though Nigerians did not know about disappearances, about people thrown in the Atlantic, about hasty graves spread with lye so the bodies would decompose fast. But only a day after the paper came out, *BBC Africa* carried the story on the news, and interviewed an exiled Nigerian professor of politics who said her husband deserved a Human Rights award. *He fights repression with the pen, he gives a voice to the voiceless, he makes the world know.* Those words angered her now, filled her with an emotion so fierce it was numbing. Just like the advice for talking to God at the American embassy angered her.

Her husband had tried to hide his nervousness from her, that the story had become so big. But that evening, after someone called him anonymously, he no longer hid his fear, he let her see his shaking hands. He got anonymous calls all the time—he was that kind of journalist, the kind that

cultivated friendships along the way. The Head of State was personally furious, the caller told him. Soldiers were on their way to arrest him. The word was it would be the last arrest, he would never come back.

Her husband climbed into the boot of the car minutes after the call, so that, if the soldiers asked, the gatemen could honestly say they did not know when her husband had left. She quickly sprinkled water in the boot, even though he told her to hurry, because she felt somehow that a wet boot would be cooler, that he would breathe better. She drove him to his co-editor's house. The next day, he called her from Togo; the co-editor had contacts who had sneaked him over the border. He had a valid visa to America; America was the best bet for now, until things blew over. She told him not to worry, she and Nnamdi would be fine, she would apply for a visa at the end of the school term, in three weeks, and they would join him in America.

That night, Nnamdi was restless and she let him stay up and play with his toy car while she corrected papers at the dining table. When the three men burst in through the kitchen door, she wished she had insisted that Nnamdi go to bed. If only.

"Many people apply for asylum visa and don't get it," the man behind her was saying. Loudly. Perhaps he had been talking all the while.

"Do you read *The New Nigeria*?" she asked suddenly. She did not turn to face the man, instead she watched the couple in front of her buy mangoes that drew flies and packets of biscuits that crackled as they opened them.

"Yes. Why? Do you want to buy it? The vendors may still have some copies."

"No. I was just asking."

"It's a really good paper. Those two editors, they are the kind of people Nigeria needs. They risk their lives every week to tell us the truth. Brave men."

"Is that what bravery is?" She turned to face him, to look into his eyes.

"Yes, of course. Not all of us can do it." He gave her a long look, righteous and suspicious, as though he was wondering if maybe she was a government apologist, one of those people who criticized the pro-democracy movement, who maintained that only a military government would work in Nigeria.

She turned away from him. Her back was throbbing now and puddles of sweat had settled wetly under her breasts. He didn't know that she was not an apologist or a democracy activist. He didn't know that she was nothing. She had not always been nothing, though. She had once been a woman who yearned for a child, who saw a string of fertility specialists, who was grateful to hear she could have one. One chance. One child.

She watched the beggars make their rounds of the visa line and the

crowd on the street, over and over. Rangy men in grimy long tunics who fingered prayer beads and quoted the Koran; women with jaundiced eyes who had sickly babies tied to their backs with threadbare cloth; a blind couple led by their daughter, blue medals of the Blessed Virgin Mary hanging around their tattered collars.

She motioned to the blind couple and fumbled in her bag for a 20 naira note. When she put it in the bowl, they chanted, "God bless you, you will have money, you will have good husband, you will have good job," in Pidgin English and then in Igbo and Yoruba.

She watched them walk away and unfolded her arms to wipe away a tear. They had not told her, "You will have many strong children." She had heard them tell that to the woman in front of the line.

The embassy gates swung open and a man in a brown uniform shouted, "First fifty on the line, come in and fill the forms. All the rest, come back another day. The embassy can attend to only fifty today."

"We are lucky, *abi*," the man behind her said.

She watched the visa interviewer behind the cold glass screen, the way limp blonde hair grazed the folded neck, the way green eyes peered at her papers above silver frames as though the glasses were unnecessary.

"Can you go through your story again, Ma'am? You haven't given me any details," the visa interviewer said with an encouraging smile.

She looked away for a moment, sideways at a woman in a bright blue *abada* wrapper who leaned close to the glass screen, reverently, as though praying to the visa interviewer behind. She would die gladly at the hands of the man with the mole, or the one with the beret, or the other nondescript one before she said a word about Nnamdi to her interviewer, or to anybody at the American embassy. Before she hawked Nnamdi for a visa to safety.

Her son had been killed, that was all she would say. Killed. Nothing about how his laughter started somehow above his head, bubbly and frothy. How he called sweets and biscuits "breadie-breadie." How he grasped her neck tight when she held him. How her husband said that he would be an artist, because he didn't try to build with his Lego blocks, he arranged them, side by side, alternating colours. They did not deserve to know.

"Ma'am? You say it was the government?" the visa interviewer asked.

It was not the government. Government was such a big label, it was freeing, it gave people room to maneuver and excuse and re-blame. It was three men. Three men like her husband or her brother, or the man who taught the class next to hers, or the man behind her in the visa line. Three men.

"Yes. They were government agents," she said.

"Can you prove it? Do you have any evidence to show that?"

"Yes. But I buried it yesterday. My son's body."

"Ma'am, I am sorry about your son. I can't imagine the pain of losing a child," the visa interviewer said, shaking her head slowly. "But I need some evidence that you know it was the government. There is fighting going on between tribes, there are private assassinations. I need some evidence of the government's involvement, and I need some evidence that you will be in danger if you stay on in Nigeria."

She looked at the faded pink lips, moving to show tiny teeth. Faded pink lips in a freckled, insulated face. A face that cared about her in a way that was deep yet shallow, in a way that was generic. A face that she might convince to grant her a visa if she said more, if she unfolded her arms, talked about her husband, about Nnamdi, perhaps cried.

"He was three years old," she said.

"Ma'am, please, I want to help you. You have to help me help you. You need to be more detailed."

She had the sudden urge to ask the visa interviewer if the stories in the *The New Nigeria* were worth the life of a child. If what her husband did was really bravery or plain foolhardiness. But she didn't. She doubted that the visa interviewer knew about pro-democracy newspapers. She doubted the visa interviewer knew about the long tired lines outside the embassy gates in cordoned off areas with no shade where the furious sun caused friendships and headaches and despair.

"Ma'am? The United States offers a new life to victims of political persecution but there needs to be proof..."

A new life. She wanted to plant *ixora* flowers in Ikoyi cemetery, the kind whose needle-thin stalks she had sucked as a child. One plant would do—his plot was so small. When it bloomed, and the flowers welcomed bees, she wanted to pluck and suck at them while squatting in the dirt. And afterwards, she wanted to arrange the sucked flowers side by side, like Nnamdi had done with his Lego blocks. That was the new life she wanted.

"Ma'am? Ma'am?"

Was she imagining it or was the sympathy draining from the visa interviewer's face? She saw the swift way the woman pushed her corn-coloured hair back even though it did not disturb her, it stayed quiet on her neck framing a pale face.

Her future rested on that face. A face that did not understand her, that probably did not cook with palm oil or know that palm oil, when fresh, was a bright bright red and, when not fresh, congealed to a lumpy orange.

She turned slowly and headed for the door.

"Ma'am?" she heard the interviewer's voice behind her. "If you choose to leave now, you will have to re-apply for another interview."

She didn't turn. She walked out of the American Embassy, past the beggars who still made their rounds with enamel bowls held outstretched, and got into her car.

David Galef

The Perfect Couple

Joe and Norma never fell into the usual marital spats about free time and sex and money and power. Nor did they wrangle much over where to eat out (they both favoured French bistro fare), what to do on Sunday afternoons (museums or movies), or how to furnish their West 75th Street apartment (retro pop on brick walls, Italian art deco furniture). Instead, they quarrelled constantly, with the monstrous fidelity of abiding love, over who suffered more and how.

"Christ, it's been a rotten day," Joe said Friday evening as he came home with his jacket over his shoulder, like the dashing lawyer he once was and still hoped to be. After making partner at Dougalby and Hache seven years ago, he had begun to subtly sag. He unloaded a bag from Fairway's that included mesquite-smoked turkey, twin baby baguettes, and arugula, all loosely comprising the theme of dinner. He announced each purchase in turn as if it were an important item of evidence, then returned to the motif of his day. "First, Alan, that pain in the ass, didn't prepare the backup we needed, then Marty somehow landed us with the wrong briefs, but that's nothing—"

"Compared with the trials *I've* been through," announced Norma, spreading her arms like a despairing diva rather than the graphic artist she was. She worked for a firm called Le Logo, which valued her at precisely her level of ability, which made for constant friction. "I had to run off five different versions of that chicken-head sketch before Arnold would let me show it, and then—"

"*Rrrraanh!*" cried Desmond, sinking his claws into the tan armrest just above Norma's tanned arm. Married almost a decade, Joe and Norma had long ago decided against a status-child in favour of a cat, the only animal who could make even more insistent claims on their attention than they did and so draw them a little out of themselves. Desmond, a rather baroque-looking Manx with a grey-and-white coat, had his own chair, his own feline ego, and might have even had his own sex life if Norma hadn't insisted on having him fixed several years earlier when the furniture began to smell like ambergris. Now he spent his days padding around the apartment and sunning himself in his chair by the window. For dinner, he received an absurdly generous portion of smoked turkey and some High-

land Farms clotted cream in a bowl. Norma made a sort of salad, and the two humans dined in comparative silence. The rest of the night passed in magazines and a Thin Man video.

On Saturday morning when Joe was out running, Norma stared at herself in the bedroom's full-length mirror for a while. The apartment had two other large-scale models, in the bathroom and by the front of the walk-in closet, but the one in the bedroom, through the subtlest warping, flattered her figure. If only she weren't so damned tired. She felt pale and looked bruised, or was that the other way around? She spent the next ten minutes brewing coffee for herself and her weekend athlete. Joe liked it strong and she liked it weak, but today she felt accommodating and made it medium strength for them both. Desmond got a little skim milk in a saucer. *Look at me*, she communicated to Joe by telepathy on his return, not yet willing to come right out and say how crappy she felt. *Be more sensitive to my needs*.

When Joe came out of the shower, he stretched hugely. "Look at me," he commented, "already yawning this early."

"I hope to hell I feel better on Monday," Norma mumbled into her pillow that evening. But she didn't. Sunday was just as bad, and getting up for the work week was like carrying around heavy carpeting on her arms and legs. Her whole body ached, and she felt—what was the word her British friend Dorothy used?—*rheumy*. She decided to stay in bed.

"I've got a code," she told Joe as soon as he came home, and he nodded in confirmation.

"I was worried about you," he told her unconvincingly as he proceeded to describe his harrowing day: more missing briefs and underling problems. Still, he did heat up some broth for her and watched approvingly as she spooned half of it up, leaving the rest for Desmond. She took some heavy cold medication and dropped into bed at nine.

But the cold didn't go away, and soon Joe began getting impatient with the sickness routine. Or, as he put it irritatingly, "Aren't you sick of being sick? I know I am." When she began coughing up green gunk the second week, Joe insisted she call Dr. Schlansky, a balding gastroenterologist who put on an avuncular GP act for his nostalgia-ridden patients.

"Now, there, young lady," he told Norma, who felt like 90, "what seems to be the problem?"

"I don't know..." Despite her confessional bent, with doctors Norma was of the "don't ask, don't tell" school of medicine, under the illusion that she was basically okay until admitting she was ill. It even bothered her to bring in an appliance and have the repairman tell her what the problem was.

"Well, let's just check under the hood." Dr. Schlansky stethoscoped her

chest, depressed her tongue, and gave her a prescription for good old-fashioned tetracycline. "There's a lot of that going around this season," he told her.

Norma was adept at popping pills. She swallowed her antibiotics daily with a swig of Evian, and after a week the symptoms disappeared. Then Joe came home sick. He said he felt achy and lay on the sofa with Desmond purring against his back. Norma fussed over him a little, bringing him aspirin and cappuccino in bed, which was more her idea of a good time than his. Joe was no more into denial than Norma but didn't like what he called "coddling his illness," which he felt was making concessions, and even tried to keep up his racquetball.

"My impatient patient," murmured Norma possessively, taking his temperature and announcing that he had a low-grade fever.

"Low-grade—my God, can't I even have high-quality symptoms?" He looked ruffled in his blue-striped pajamas, forming a sort of nest by his groin into which Desmond snuggled. "I haven't got time for this."

But the achiness persisted, funnelling into a lump under his left armpit. And even though he self-diagnosed it as a blocked sweat gland, he dutifully went to his doctor, a gangly internist named Behrens, on the principle of what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, though who'd first said that, Norma or himself, he couldn't remember.

Dr. Behrens gave him a full physical check-up, peered at Joe's left armpit, said it was probably an infected gland, and put him on azithromycin. The achiness mostly dissipated, though the swelling didn't recede much. When he went out to run on Sundays, he felt somehow clunkier, as if running in combat boots, but couldn't prove anything since he'd stopped timing himself after making partner. That Norma said nothing about it bothered him. He waited vainly, in vain.

As Norma's analyst once explained to her, women's narcissism was based chiefly on appearances and a wish to be adored, whereas men's narcissism was founded more on performance and a need to be admired (Norma digested all this but soon forgot it, as she did with almost everything her therapist told her). Thus, Norma would continually tell Joe, "God, my hair looks so mousy," inviting a tricky-to-negotiate cross between sympathy and spirited disagreement. And Joe would complain about his slowing down but grow peevish if she concurred with him. When he resumed his racquetball on Tuesday and Thursday nights, Norma in retaliation joined an evening life-painting class downtown and began having long coffees afterward with a Cooper Union crowd. They contemplated buying a 1960's Eames chair for the living room but couldn't agree where to put it. And time passed desultorily until September, when the ficus leaves began to swirl about the sewer gratings, and Norma came down

with something upper respiratory, which this time really lingered.

"You look pale again," Joe accused her.

"I know." She coughed into her latest bouquet of tissues. *I suffer in silence*, she radioed him. *Tell me how I look like a doomed heroine from a nineteenth-century novel.*

He shook his head gently. "This is aging both of us."

"Shut up, Joe," she told him.

"It's understandable you're upset. I felt that way when I was sick." He gave her such a sweetly comprehending smile that she wanted to kick him.

"This isn't going away," he told her after three weeks. "If you love me, you'll go see Dr. Schlansky again."

"Your white cell count is over 90,000." Dr. Schlansky's lips, usually as wide-open and mobile as a comedian's, were compressed into two bloodless lines. "I'm sending your sample to a hematologist."

"Which means?" asked Joe that night, after hearing the news. He paced in a circle bounded by their Afghan throw-rug. "What does he think it is?"

"I don't know, I don't know, I hope it's not—that." Norma had contracted into a fetal ball on their newly acquired Eames chair, holding onto her feet and rocking mournfully. Desmond batted a catnip mouse in her direction, but she simply wasn't interested. Getting through the week was like crouching under a ruined ceiling, waiting for a large chunk of plaster to fall on her head. Joe kept telling her how upset he was. When she finally went back to the doctor's office—no results over the phone—she took baby steps all the way.

"Look, I'll be as honest as I can with you." Dr. Schlansky passed a hand over his thinning gray hair, and suddenly Norma realized how her doctor had aged since she'd started seeing him seven years earlier. "We've checked the blood smears. They show a pattern of myelocytic leukemia—we're not sure how advanced. We need to do a bone-marrow extraction for that. Now, we're going to be aggressive about this," he continued helplessly as Norma started sobbing. He offered her a tissue from his desk, and in taking it she clutched his hand up to the wrist. After a while, he gently disengaged himself and sent her to the nurse to set up another appointment.

"Oh, God, I can't believe it—my darling!" Joe held her so hard that she felt him almost pass through her. He acted both consolatory to her and angry at the world, and he tiptoed around the apartment performing little kindnesses for her until she told him to quit it, she wasn't that far gone. But when the bone-marrow results came back, she locked herself into the bathroom and wouldn't come out for hours. Staring at herself in the mirror, she imagined herself already wasted away. "At least I don't have to worry about going on a diet," she told her reflection, but her laugh was more like

a frog's croak. She wanted to go to Argyle, a cute little *boite* in the East Twenties, but the drug regimen Schlansky had put her on didn't leave her much of an appetite, and she ended up vomiting instead and ruining a Prada blouse. The chemo was dripped in through an IV, so at least she didn't have to swallow a flood of pills, but it seemed to hit like a wave.

Joe played the role of ministering angel for a while, showing unsuspected creativity in his ministrations: bouquets in the armholes of her jacket in the closet, and he even half-trained Desmond to half-fetch Norma's slippers. "I know you're suffering, too," she told him, kissing his stiff upper lip.

"Listen, you're strong, and I know we'll beat this thing." It wasn't necessarily what he believed, but it had the right tough-guy edge. He put his whole ego into it. He tried to remind himself that when she snapped at him, it was just her illness speaking, even when she told him, "Fuck you, it's me, Norma." He cut back on his racquetball nights to attend to her and felt he was attaining the status of a saint. The needier she became, the stronger he felt.

It couldn't last. Two months into her treatment, he announced, "I'm bushed," to Desmond, who had taken to eyeing him suspiciously as if he were a faux Joe. His fatigue didn't disappear but grew to encompass his whole day. It felt like another low-grade fever that wouldn't go away, and his left armpit ached again. That meant a trip to Dr. Behrens, who clucked his tongue and said they'd do a biopsy. Joe paced the living room at night. "Biopsy, biopsy—why do I hate that word?" Norma bit her tongue for his sake and quietly bought seven different wigs to cover her growing baldness.

The diagnosis of lymphoma (non-Hodgkin's, metastasized to the chest) was delivered by the end of the week in a consultation room with the lights dimmed, as if in recognition of the dismal news. Behrens put his hands on Joe's shoulders, like coaching a punch-drunk fighter before the final round.

"Look, it's not the end of the battle. We've still got some firepower to combat this invasion." Usually Joe admired Behrens's military metaphors, but today they struck him as overdone. He viciously kicked at a row of trash cans on the way home until the super came out and told him to beat it.

Norma held him tight, murmuring, "Oh, Joe," repeatedly. She found the rhythm soothing. Norma had read about Florence Nightingale when she was a girl and began to really get into it. In the days that followed, she was so sympathetic that he suspected a misery-loves-company motive, though he couldn't quite bring himself to say that. Instead, he let himself be given a temple rub and a foot massage. All Sunday the three of them, with Desmond in the middle, lay in bed and made up games to pass the

time. Norma won the ceiling-shadow labeling contest, but Desmond beat them both in hide-and-find the catnip mouse.

"I'm still going to work," announced Joe tightly, stuffing three fat folders into his briefcase. "I won't let this take me over." When he got to his office, no one treated him any differently, and at first he was pleased.

Arnold told me to take off as long as I wanted, mused Norma. *Do I really look that bad?* She spent over an hour in front of the closet mirror, scheduled a 4:30 facial at Maxine's, and appeared at Le Logo a little before lunch. She soon became absorbed in her latest project, a scholarly-looking jack rabbit for a speedy copy service. She had the impression that everyone was tiptoeing around her but didn't feel she could say anything. As for telling other people, both she and Joe were single children, and only their mothers were still alive, in twin nursing homes coincidentally three miles apart. Joe guardedly informed two of his colleagues *cum* racquetball partners, and they surreptitiously told a few others. That meant he was treated more deferentially at work, a subtle shift—until a secretary sobbed how sorry she was to hear that he had lymphoma, and that night he played his last game of racquetball, weakened but vicious and uncontrollable. "Joe's final game," as he narrated it to himself, distorting the score in his memory.

Norma's art friends could see quite well what was going on and whispered how sorry they were, and behind her back how sorry a sight she had become. Norma thought briefly of herself as a work in transition, but performance art wasn't her *métier*. She took to bringing home what she called her Scarred Nudes: a series of naked women with tumorous black splotches in strategic areas. Dr. Schlansky had vetoed a bone-marrow transplant because there was no match available. "I am truly unique," she consoled herself.

A few weeks later, she and Joe agreed to rendezvous after work at Sakura, a sushi place in the East Fifties. Joe, who had just started on a new drug regimen, ordered a tekamaki plate that he couldn't finish. Just to be polite, Norma got plain white rice and, with one chopstick, pushed around the pickles that came with it. They sipped green tea and tried to commiserate with each other.

"I know you feel drekky," said Joe, sympathetically but tactlessly. She thought he was referring to how she looked.

"Well, you've got to be run down, too. It's taken you half an hour to attack that tekamaki." She leaned closer, her pale face and shadowed eyes more than a little Munch-like. "Offhand, I'd say it's winning."

Joe viciously stabbed the remaining half of his food with a chopstick and said hoarsely, "Let's leave."

Three months later came a roller coaster of remissions and false hopes. "I feel like *me* again!" announced Norma brightly and wondered whether

she should join a gym. "My self-image is back."

"I'm glad to hear it," mumbled Joe. When he complained, she let him, but what good did that do? Even Desmond, with his finicky feline soul, seemed to treat him with forbearance. What hit him most was his inability to perform, whether in bed or in court. And here was Norma chattering about a health club. He let Dr. Behrens switch his medication and hoped for a change—better or worse, he didn't care.

The new drugs took a while to make themselves felt, but they kicked in just as Norma fell ill again. Joe slowly reacquired his energy and even wondered whether he could beat some of his former racquetball partners again. That's the old Joe, he sang to himself. Meanwhile, a deep-seated infection lodged in Norma's left lung, and she was prone to coughing spasms that lasted from the couch to the bathroom. She began to bruise as easily as an over-ripe peach, an unkind comparison that Joe made one night after noticing the mottled skin on her forearms.

"Damn it, Joe, if you knew how I felt—"

"But I *do* know how you feel—"

"No," she declared. "Lymphoma's not as bad as leukemia."

He stuck his mottled tongue out at her. "It's worse."

She threw up her hands. "All right, it's different."

"*Vive la différence.*" He would have pursued the sarcasm, but Norma snatched that moment to have one of her coughing fits. Dramatizing her illness, he thought sourly.

High on prednisone, one of the immunosuppressant mainstays even in his new arsenal, as Dr. Behrens called it, Joe succumbed to a stomach bug that he might have otherwise fought off. "Messy, messy," chided Norma as she stepped from the shower around her retching husband. Joe rolled his eyes at her, she rolled hers back, and they erupted into a bile-black laughter that they both cherished for the rest of the day.

"A pact, okay?" said Norma the next morning. She was industriously applying foundation to hide her sallow complexion. One of her discarded wigs lay splayed on the toilet seat cover as if covering a giant white groin. "You don't comment on my appearance, and I won't make any cracks about yours."

"What's the matter with the way I look?" demanded Joe, who'd just finished checking his urine for blood. Not that it was supposed to be one of the symptoms, but he worried anyway.

"Nothing. Dear." She smiled in a way that seemed to crack her face in half and pecked him on the cheek. "We're both perfect, okay?"

Joe forced a grin. "Right. Every day in every way, we're getting better and better. Our mantra for the day."

No one asked Desmond what he thought.

One Monday evening, Norma dragged herself home from what was left of her job at Le Logo at around the same time that Joe limped back from lawyering and stopped off at Fairway's. Hearing the *clunk-clunk* of his wingtips up the stairs, she wished for a moment that the sound would just continue upward, past the threshold of the door. No one to judge her, no one to detract from her suffering. But no, the key came out of the jingly pocket to fumble in the lock, and Mr. Sick walked in.

"Took me half an hour to get through the subway crowd," he groaned, perhaps a little more theatrically than necessary.

"That's nothing," she practically cackled. "I had a dizzy spell after lunch that floored me."

"Anyway, I made it to the store." He hoisted his limp plastic bag heroically. "I got smoked turkey and some hothouse tomatoes—"

"*Yukk*. Even the thought of food—"

"I know, I know, but we've got to eat."

"You do it, then."

"I don't feel so great, either, you know."

They compared recent symptoms: his night-sweats versus her low-grade infections, her bronchial troubles as opposed to his endless aches.

"I win," she announced with as much triumph as her blocked air passages could muster.

"The hell you say!" He intended to kick the table but connected with Desmond instead, who hissed as he fled into the living room. At night, both had dreams of impossible health, usually at the expense of the other, symbolized in Joe's versions by a coal furnace of guilt. Norma dreamed of endless fields marked by gaping pits and a man stuck in each of them.

They pondered the idea of couples counselling, going so far as to get a recommendation for a grief therapist, "but I don't see much of a future in it," Norma joked. The leukemia had spread to her bones, and Dr. Schlanksy had begun to mumble. Joe's condition had hit a new low plateau stabilized by yet another drug therapy. Dr. Behrens was sticking to his military metaphors but talking more of conditional surrender. Joe could barely walk. Desmond was regretfully packed off to a friend of Norma's who had seven cats and presumably wouldn't mind one more.

On their fifth anniversary, which seemed in retrospect like some mythical faraway country, they had checked into the Waldorf. Now, as their tenth anniversary loomed in the iron cold of February, they decided to do it again. Only neither would admit it was a hospice instead of a hotel.

"I guess you pay on the way out," whispered Joe as he was wheeled into the elevator. He insisted on pushing the button himself, which made him feel more in control, even though Norma wanted to push it for the same

reason.

"Ask about the room service," cracked Norma wheezily. When Joe was wheeled out on the tenth floor, Norma blew him a kiss but stayed inside. By mutual agreement, they would be on separate levels. It had simply grown too difficult to keep competing. But Norma was determined to out-suffer him, and she visited her husband for two weeks as his vision darkened and his jaw slackened. They talked about themselves like two tape recorders slowly running down in an empty room. Every once in a while, when they paused to acknowledge each other, they could be tender.

"You look in rare form," she told him, knowing he liked that phrase.

"You're not so well done yourself." He grinned like a skull.

During Joe's last few days, in and out of lucidity, he talked about torts, and he died with his arm upraised as if to connect in a final racquetball shot.

Norma survived him by less than a day, her mind numbed with painkillers and filled with floating shapes that wouldn't stay still long enough for her to paint them. *I'm still here*, she thought right near the end. But when she turned to tell Joe, he wasn't there, and that just killed her.

Tim Lander

How They Made a Man of Me

And in those days
they said they'd make a man of me
gave me a scratchy battle dress
and a pair of boots to shine
told me to climb on the pot bellied stove
and sing
well yes I sang for them

Made me yell and charge across a muddy field
in my shiny boots
and yelling thrust a bayonet deep in the mortal guts
of a bag of straw
and I yelled and thrust
and thrust again and yelled

They gave me a pickaxe handle
and told me to stand guard
long winter nights
that christmas when the IRA
looted an armory
just down the road
so we marched around in the night
swinging our axe handles
smoking in doorways
getting a Christmas nip
from the Sergeants' wives

And in those days
it was all Suez and Hungary
and the commies
knocking loudly on the door
nor were the Egyptians
acting much like gentlemen

while we learnt our drill
backwards and forwards
up and down the old parade ground
every day
Slope Arms! Present Arms! Order Arms!
About Turn! At the Double Mark Time!

They said they'd make a man of me
and gave me an old gun
told me how I'd learn to love it
like it was my favourite girl
showed me how to point it at a person
two hundred yards away
hold my breath
and gently squeeze—not blinking
then it jumped into my shoulder
showed me how to work the bolt
shove another bullet
up the hole
and squeeze again
all in five seconds
or was it three?
the accurate dispensation of death
and I learnt it all unthinking
learnt their lesson
how to be a man
and the accurate dispensation of death

and what women were for
and how to use them
we learnt that on the side
from the old soldiers
with their brothel talk

Such a piece of equipment
This is what you call the parts
and this what you use them for
Any questions?
and keep your equipment clean
doing it all by numbers

One two three
One two three
One
About turn
at the double Dismiss!
Squad will advance, by the night, quick march
Squad will retreat about turn
double march
They taught me how to be a man
Polish y'r boots
Blanco y'r gaiters
Shine y'r buckles til you can see y'r face in them
little circles
little circles
a hot spoon to smooth away
the pimples in y'r boot leather
"Bags of Bull"
they said
"Bags of Bull"
"It's not bullshit it's Personal Pride"
they said
"There's no bullshit in the army"
Kit all folded to the size of a mess tin
Mess tin polished til you can see y'r ugly mug in it
you never put no food in it
you'd spoil the shine
you have a greasy one
you keep it out of sight
that's what you take
when you go down to the cookhouse
Polish y'r boots
drink y'r beer
fall in for Church parade
Sing hymns to God and his British Empire

I am a man
'cos that's wot they made of me
gave me a number
to remember all my life
two, double three, double four, five six two
sapper lander, sir

“Wot you think this is?
a fucking garden party?
Wot’s y’r name and number sapper?”
“23344562, SAPPERLANDER SIR!”
“That’s better, say it like y’r proud of it
I don’t want anyone in my troop
who’s not proud to be a sapper. Right?
Get y’r feet down hard!
You horrible little man sir
WOT R U ?”
“A HORRIBLE LITTLE MAN. SIR.”
“Why can’t you keep in step you horrible little man?
You march like a pregnant duck
You look like a bag of shit
tied together with a string round the middle”

So they made a man of me
Come on, Let’s have you!
“Hands off your cocks and on with y’r socks!
Get y’r feet on the floor!”
Make y’r bed, lay out y’r kit
fall in on the road
march down to breakfast—
stand by y’r beds
“Wot’s this? You call this a straight line?
get out y’r piece of string
line it up all again”
The beds, socks, underwear
Spare cap badges
“There’s dust here sapper
y’r on a charge
Report to the Guard room after parade”
Out on the parade ground up and down
or “Today we’re going to build us a bridge,
you lucky lads”
Twelve men to a bridge panel
“All together. Lift. Quick march”
night exercises
stumbling in the dark
same old bridge
same old mind hole

Church parade
pray for the sergeant's soul
Down to the sick bay
roll up y'r sleeves
jab it in
"No drinking for 48 hours
or we'll have to give you another shot"
then with sore arms
and inflamed lymph nodes
sent home on leave
in scratchy uniforms
back to our mums
for a long weekend
to dance with the girls
"It's not bad really
I can take it"
to their soft
unmilitary eyes

and all to make sure
it was
that the sun on the
British Empire
set
in an orderly fashion



Kevin Kerr

from Unity (1918)

CHARACTERS

Beatrice – a farmer's daughter
Sissy – her younger sister, a doomsday prophet
Mary – a debutante, Beatrice's best friend
Rose – a telephone operator
Doris – a telegraph operator
Sunna – a mortician and an outcast
Stan – an incompetent farmer and widower
Hart – a blinded war hero
Michael – a farm hand
Glen – a returning war veteran
Two Men on the street – farmers
A chaperone at the V-Day Dance

NOTE ON EVENTS

In the fall of 1918 an influenza pandemic swept the planet. Largely forgotten now, this was the deadliest outbreak of an infectious virus in recorded history. Although it is uncertain exactly how many people died, estimates range from 20 to 50 million people worldwide. The Spanish Flu, as it became known, was an especially unusual strain of this otherwise common sickness, since the victims were mainly young adults 20 to 40 years of age—strong and healthy and in the prime of life. In Canada, where per capita war casualties were particularly severe, more people died in four weeks of the flu than did in four years of war.

The following excerpt is from Act II. The Spanish Flu has turned from a rumour into a terrible reality. Beatrice, a young woman who has just turned 21, is struggling with the changes she is seeing in the world around her. She dreams of Glen, a local boy who is overseas and with whom she has been secretly infatuated. Her sister, Sissy, has become a doomsday prophet eagerly awaiting the apocalypse and has grown even more unpredictable and eccentric since the death of Michael, the young farmhand who is the

first to succumb to the flu. Beatrice has also been paying visits to the mysterious blinded war hero who arrived in Unity in search of his estranged father—the town's undertaker. The soldier, Hart, finds instead that his father is dead and his cousin, Sunna, a girl of 15, has taken over the family business. Also, Stan, a local farmer who has lost his wife in childbirth, is now courting Sunna, and Mary, the childhood friend of Beatrice mourns the death of her fiancé, a victim of the flu on the front lines. Finally, the town's telegraph and telephone operators Rose and Doris attempt to keep their fingers on the pulse of the tiny town even though contagion is battering at their door.

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ACT II SCENE FIVE
IN TOWN

On the street, two men wearing masks approach and pass each other.

Man1: *(turning back)* Fred?

Man2: Who's that?

Man1: Is that you Fred?

Man2: Ted?

Man1: Fred!

Man2: Ted! Geez, how are you?

They shake hands then wipe their palms on their trousers.

Man1: Oh, real good.

Man2: You done threshing then?

Man1: Oh yeah, you?

Man2: Oh, nearly, though.

Man1: Well, that'll be good then. It's like a ghost town down here.

Man2: Yup.

A woman wearing a mask passes by. They tip their hats.

Man1: Afternoon.

Man2: Who was that?

Man1: Wasn't that Gadfly's wife?

Man2: Was it?

Man1: I thought it was. Yep, it's quiet down here.

Man2: I read that this flu is uh...might be the Germans.

Man1: Is that right? I thought it might be the germs.

A little laugh.

Man2: No really, though, some secret weapon they planted on the coast.

Man1: Hmm. Now how did they manage to figure that out?

Man2: Well if they can get it going in one place on the coast with maybe one of those U-boats, then the rest sort of takes care of itself. It's contagious.

Man1: I mean, but how did they figure out how to make a disease like that?

Man2: Oh, yeah, yeah, I don't know. They can do all sorts of things these days.

Man1: I guess that's true.

Man2: That poison, uh, gas.

Man1: Sure. Electricity and such.

Man2: Hmm?

Man1: It's amazing what can be done.

Man2: Oh, it sure is.

Sissy enters and, as she passes, gives them a handmade flyer.

Man2: What's that say?

Man1: *(reading)* "End of the world to come
Date set for late November
Sissy Wilde speaks on the Apocalypse"

Man2: That's another epidemic.

Man1: What is?

Man2: Women speaking publicly.

Man1: Oh, yeah. There's that one... What's that they say about a dog walking on its hind legs?

Man2: I don't know.

Man1: Oh, it's something about that a woman talking is like a dog on its hind legs, or... You know that one?

Man2: No. You know Gadfly's got a smart little dog there.

Man1: Gadfly does? Oh, yeah.

Man2: Yeah, a little Collie or something.

Man1: Is that what it is?

Man2: A little Collie I think. Smart little devil. Herds like a son of a gun.

Sunna walks by reading one of Sissy's pamphlets. The men nod to her.

Man2: Who was that?

Man1: That was that Thorson girl.

Man2: Oh, yeah. Well I guess she's got her work cut out for her now.

Man1: Yep. I suppose she's in the right business now.

Man2: If the world don't end.

Man1: Right. Well, better head for home.

Man2: Sure, then. Getting cold.

Man1: Oh, yeah. Yeah, could be a cold one.

They exit.

SIX
A CALL FOR HELP

A split scene between the Telegraph office and Beatrice's home. Doris lies convalescing while Rose speaks to Beatrice.

Rose: Women are naturally good at taking care of others. Men, even doctors, are weaker than women. The town needs your help. There's a natural strength that a woman gets when she's helping others that protects her. You'll get the flu faster by not helping.

Bea: Uh huh.

Rose: You know, Beatrice, fear is the real killer. This town was doing fine until people started to believe they could catch the flu.

Doris: It's a war.

Rose: Yes, it's a war and we must be ready to fight.

Bea: It's a war.

Rose: Yes, a war. There are so many families that need you. And you know how to look after people.

Bea: I do?

Rose: You've been looking after your father and sister most of your life. I'd be out there, but it's essential that I keep the telephones operating and care for Doris. And we know how quickly she would volunteer if she wasn't so ill. You can go to doctor Lindsey's and take anything you need.

Bea: Okay.

SEVEN
ANATOMY

Sunna and Stan are silhouetted in lantern light. The soldier sits motionless in the corner. Sunna wears a simple white wedding dress. Stan kisses Sunna. Sunna then begins to undress Stan. He does not hear her speak.

Stan: Oh, Sunna.

Sunna: There are things that you can know. There are patterns you can find. Clues.

Stan: Oh...

Sunna: Most human bodies are the same. Draw two parallel lines down from the pupil of the eyes and you find the corners of the mouth. Tip of the thumb to the tip of the index finger is the length of the nose. Length of the nose is one-third the length of the face.

She touches his face: chin, brow, top of head.

One. Two. Three. The width of the eye is the distance between the eyes, which is the distance from where the ear joins the skull to the top of the ear. From the chin to the lower lip is twice that of the upper lip to the nose. From the wrist to the tip of the middle finger is the width of the head. And the depth of the head? That's the ball of the heel to the tip of the toe.

Stan: Sunna.

Sunna: And half way between the hip and the knee is where the longest finger touches when hanging freely by the side. Differences are only on the surface. Look closely and you will see the same. The model is consistent. Like triangles or circles, there's a pattern. I look for patterns. Clues to keep me going.

Fade to darkness.

EIGHT A SORT OF SALVE

In the mortuary Beatrice is changing Hart's bandages. The Ukrainian funeral song is in the distance. Hart's back is to us as Beatrice slowly and tenderly unwraps the bandages. When she finally uncovers his eyes she recoils momentarily, then stares for a moment.

Hart: Pretty messy?

Bea: Oh...

Hart: What's that music?

Bea: Uh, Ukrainians.

Hart: *(laughs)* Oh, right.

Bea: What?

Hart: Musical place—the Ukraine.

Bea: I don't know.

Beatrice produces some ointment in a jar. She puts some on her fingers and moves towards his eyes, stops, withdraws, then tries again. Stops.

Hart: What's that smell?

Bea: Huh? Oh, I have something that might help. It's a sort of salve for the skin. Um, for the burn. You rub it on.

Hart: Oh, sure. Let's have some.

Bea: Okay, just uh...give me your hands. Please.

Hart extends his hands, and Bea transfers the ointment from her fingers to his.

Bea: Now just rub it around your eyes.

He does.

Hart: Quite a smell. That's nice singing.

Bea: I think it's a funeral.

Hart: Oh yeah? How's this?

Bea: That's pretty good.

Hart gropes for something to wipe his hands on. Bea looks too, but there's nothing around. She offers the hem of her dress. Hart, without realizing what it is, wipes his hands vigorously, dabs his eyes and blows his nose. He starts gathering up the material trying to find its end.

Hart: Wow, a big hanky.

Bea quickly snatches it away, embarrassed. Silence. Bea puts the ointment away.

Hart: *(figures it out)* Oh! *(pause)* Oh...sorry.

Bea: It's okay.

Hart: I thought...I didn't... Oh, that's really terrible of me.

Bea: No, it's fine. *(small laugh)* Big hanky. Here's a fresh bandage.

She bandages his eyes.

Hart: Ah, that's good.

They sit. Silence.

Hart: Yep. *(sings)* Dee diddely dee.

Pause.

Hart: It's nice to have company. The living sort.

Bea: *(pause)* I've got the newspaper from Saskatoon. Would you like me to read it to you?

Hart: Oh that sounds nice.

Bea: They have this section where they write stories of Canadian bravery.

Hart: War stories?

Bea: Yes.

Hart: No.

Bea: They're always quite good.

Hart: No, I don't want to hear any!

Bea: Oh, but—

Hart: I said no!

Bea: I—

Hart: They're not true.

Bea: They're not?

Hart: No.

Bea: I'm sure they wouldn't write them if...

Hart: They're always some stupid story about some stupid guy who's run out of ammunition and wounded in every part of his body, who takes over command after his captain's been killed and somehow runs a mile into enemy territory where, with only a rock and comb, manages to kill seven hundred Germans and take an entire battalion prisoner, who he marches right across the English Channel while getting them all to sing God Save the King. Right? But, they're never about the guy sitting in a trench with his lousy jammed up standard issue rifle that has only fired one shot before busting with his head between his knees and his pants full of his own shit because he's been there for three days in the same position between the corpses of a couple of guys who looked up when he said "Heads Down" and he's wondering if the captain who he last saw running the other way was really just going for more supplies or is he dead or is he what or is he just the only one who had any brains.

Bea: Oh.

Hart: That's all. So I don't like those stories. Is there anything else in that paper?

Bea: Well...um... Not much...else... Just some other little news and advertisements.

Hart: For what?

Bea: Oh, you know, medicine, biscuits, uh stove, ladies fashions, automobiles...

Hart: Yeah read me those. Ladies fashions. What's new this fall?

Bea: Ladies fashions?

Hart: Yeah. What are they wearing now?

Bea: Well, here's one for hats—quite a few hats—and I think they don't look very practical...and right next is silk...uh...silk underwear...

Hart: Mmmm...

Scene shifts.

NINE A FIRE

Sissy stands in the night air with a lantern. She reads from the bible.

Sissy: “And behold a pale horse, and he that sat upon him, his name was death and hell followed him. And power was given to him over the four parts of the earth, to kill with sword, with famine, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth!” Members, we are less than a month away from the prophesized date and we will soon be released. Six thousand years are up. Michael, like the lamb, you were the first. Clearing the way for us all. A fire, a fire you wanted. So tonight, a fire for Michael, for life at the edge of death, at the edge of eternity.

Flames rise.

TEN TELEGRAPH OFFICE

Rose is at the switchboard. Doris is resting.

Rose: Central. Hello Stan. Good lord, where? Oh my lord. Just a second.

She rises and looks out her window.

Doris: Now what has he done?

Rose: *(to Doris)* Shh! *(to Stan)* Yes I can see the flames from here. Well who can I call? We'll never get enough people together. As long

as you're safe... Call who? Wildes? What for? She did? Why? Oh my lord, she didn't! Why would she do such a thing? That's a desecration... I'll call and I'll come right down.

ELEVEN THE MORTUARY

Beatrice alone.

Bea: November 11th, 1918. Still no trains into Unity. Father rode Blister to Saskatoon for winter work. He said he wasn't worried about the flu—too many other people to pick on in the big city. He said he wasn't worried about us. He knew that I could take care of things. When I told him that I would make sure that Sissy went back to school when they opened again he said it didn't really matter. The girl knows too much already. I didn't tell him about Sissy wanting to give a speech about the Bible. Last night, I was woken by a call from Rose.

In the mortuary.

Stan: How the hell could you think of doing that to another human being?

Sissy: It's what he wanted.

Sunna: He was dead.

Stan: You destroyed my property! *(to Sunna)* What?

Sunna: He was dead, is all.

Stan: What difference does that make? *(back to Sissy)* It was my property! You've committed some serious crimes here.

Beatrice enters.

Bea: Sissy! What's happened?

Stan: Where's your father?

Bea: Saskatoon.

Stan: Saskatoon?

Bea: Yes, he left—

Rose: *(entering)* Now what's going on?

Sissy: He works at the sawmill there after harvest is done.

Stan: Quiet!

Bea: *(to Sissy)* What happened?

Rose: *(to Beatrice)* You shouldn't be here.

Stan: She stole a body from here and burned it—

Sissy: *(to Rose)* She shouldn't? And you should?

Stan: on my haystack. *(to Sissy)* I said quiet, you!

Rose: God help us!

Bea: Sissy!

Sissy: Michael wanted it!

Hart: Excuse me—

Bea: Sissy...

Stan: I have horses!

Rose: What's the matter with your horses? *(covering her nose as she gets close to the body)* Oh my lord!

Stan: Nothing, but they'll starve this winter thanks to this—

Sissy: They won't starve!

Stan: girl here. They will without feed!

Sissy: It's the end of—

Rose: What happened to the boy?

Sissy: Beatrice?

Hart: Excuse me—

Stan: She set him on fire.

Rose: Oh my Lord! Where is he?

Sunna: (*referring to a corpse under a sheet*) Here.

Sissy: Beatrice, please.

Rose: (*looking under sheet*) Oh, my Lord Jesus Christ!

Stan: See!

Sissy: It's worse because they pulled him off! You should have left him!

Stan: Don't you dare blame us you evil bitch of a whore!

Rose: Stan!

Stan: She destroyed my feed!

Sissy: Not all of it!

Rose: What about the boy!

Stan: That's another thing altogether.

Sunna: I'll bury him tomorrow.

Sissy: You don't touch him. I'll bury him tomorrow.

Sunna: Fine.

Stan: You'll do no such thing! We'll end up—

Sissy: You can't tell me—

Rose: I don't know why he wasn't buried before!

Stan: losing the whole town. God knows what—(to *Beatrice*) goddammit girl! Your father will pay me for that lost hay!

Bea: I'm sure we'll be able—

Sunna: She wanted to see him.

Hart: Hello! Excuse me! If I may say... Excuse me, sorry, but if I may say, Sissy may have been trying to help you all.

Stan: What the hell—

Hart: That boy died of the flu. The body carries germs. Burning it may have been wise, in a way. I'm not saying it's all right, really, but—

Rose: You don't treat a human body like some pile of rubbish! No it's definitely not all right!

Sissy: Rubbish? It was a funeral!

Stan: (to *Bea*) What's wrong with your family?

Bea: Nothing!

Hart: Sir, be fair. These girls are very kind.

Rose: We would have been better off if you never came here.

Stan: Leave him alone!

Sunna: This has nothing to do with him!

Rose: He brought this flu!

Bea: He's not even sick!

Hart: Is she talking about me?

Stan: Rose, he didn't do anything!

Rose: I'm not blaming the girl, Stan, although it's certainly doing her no harm with people sick and dying.

Stan: You keep your mouth shut about her!

Rose: She's just like her uncle was. No sense of—and then bringing in someone who's been in the middle of an epidemic.

Hart: She didn't bring me in! She didn't want me here!

Stan: Well why the hell did you come?

Sissy: He wanted a fire!

Pause.

Hart: Me?

Sissy: Michael! Michael wanted a fire! I was doing it for him! No one would help him so why do you care? *(to Rose)* You! Rubbish? He was thrown dead off the train like rubbish! Nobody complained then! Now you're upset? I won't have him stuffed underground with no one noticing or caring. Even when you knew there was no one for him at home you wouldn't let him back! And I wasn't trying to stop the flu either! I hope you all catch it and you all die!

Underneath the end of her line the phone begins to sound a strange pattern of rings.

Rose: Shhh! Emergency ring! *(she picks up the phone)* Hello? Yes? Speak up. Oh my Lord, oh my Lord. *(she hangs up)* Telegram. It's over. The war is over. It's victory.

Silence for a moment. Suddenly everybody cheers and hugs. Sissy joins in the rejoicing and is included by all. Hart is pulled into the fray. The group suddenly stops and there is silence except for a howling wind that has come up. Everyone slowly withdraws from each other and masks are produced and donned. Lantern light flickers, then darkness.

TWELVE V-DAY DANCE

Bea: November 13th, 1918. Last night I slept so deeply. Last night I didn't dream. I awoke to the sound of the train whistle as the first train pulled into the station since the town was quarantined.

Mary: *(she clears her throat with a little cough)* Sorry. The Victory Day Dance. Welcome. Under special provisions, the town by-law prohibiting public gatherings has been amended to allow for this celebration dance in honour of the end of the war. However, there are certain and specific rules: masks must be worn at all times, the dance will only last one hour and thirty minutes, and band members playing brass instruments are kindly asked to not empty their spit valves onto the bandstand or dance hall floor. Thank you. Also, dance partners wishing to dance must remain one yard apart at all times. A very special welcome home to Unity's own returning war heroes—Alan McCaw and Glen Brambley.

Beatrice, Sissy, and Mary stand separately. Shadows of dancers flicker about the stage. Glen stands in uniform, isolated in a shaft of light. Beatrice tries to get up the nerve to approach him, when Sissy beats her to the punch. Sissy and Glen dance a waltz without touching each other. Over time their steps become more complicated and they are perfectly in synch. Meanwhile Beatrice watches in frustration until she can't take it anymore. Glen dips Sissy still without touching her. When she's fully extended backwards, Beatrice screams out.

Bea: Glen!

Sissy falls.

Bea: Glen!

Glen: Hi?

Bea: Hi. Sorry.

Sissy: What are you doing?

Bea: You don't mind Sissy. Sorry.

Glen: Who is that?

Bea: It's me...Beatrice. Beatrice Wilde.

Glen: Oh. Oh, hi. How are you?

Bea: Fine. *(to Sissy)* Get up!

Sissy: I was waiting for a hand.

Bea: You don't need a hand.

Glen: I'm sorry. Let me help you—

He reaches down and helps Sissy up.

Voice: One yard apart!

Glen: *(pulling back)* Ooops.

Sissy: Thanks.

Bea: I don't mean to interrupt, but—

Glen: That's okay.

Sissy: I'm going for punch.

Bea: Okay.

Glen: Thanks for the dance.

Sissy: Save another one for me. You're pretty good.

She exits.

Bea: How are you?

Glen: I'm really good. How are you?

Bea: Fine.

Glen: Well, great. You surprised me there.

Bea: I'm sorry. I just wanted to tell you—

Voice: One yard apart!

Bea: Oh. I just wanted to tell you how proud...we all are of you.

Glen: Oh, thanks.

Bea: And we're really glad you're home.

Glen: Oh me too.

Bea: You are?

Voice: One yard apart over there!

Glen: *(to the chaperone)* Sorry! *(to Beatrice)* Do you want to go outside?

Bea: Uh...*(pause)* yes.

Glen: Great! Let's cool off, as they say.

Bea: Sure.

Beatrice hesitates looking back at Sissy and Mary, and then exits with Glen. Suddenly they are outside in the night air.

Glen: Yeah, it's good to be home.

Bea: It is?

Glen: It was a long time.

Bea: I know. It was.

Glen: Yeah, and you begin to forget things.

Bea: You did? Like what?

Glen: Oh little things. The look of town, the feeling of being here, people...

Bea: Does it seem different?

Glen: Well, then you come back and it all just seems like yesterday. Nothing's changed and what you—

Bea: No, it hasn't.

Glen: thought you had forgotten is all there again.

Bea: Oh, that's good. You're just like I remembered.

Glen: Yeah?

Bea: Well, you seem more... Well...I don't know... You look... *(she mumbles)* Well you look very handsome.

Glen: What?

Bea: Oh, you just look nice in your uniform.

Glen: Oh, thanks.

Bea: It must have been hard to come back to little Unity after seeing the rest of the world.

Glen: No, it wasn't hard at all. What I saw of the world wasn't all that great.

Bea: Oh.

Glen: I'm looking forward to getting back on the farm and settling down.

Bea: Really?

Glen: Sure. Hey, can I show you something special?

Bea: Yes.

He produces a wool sock.

Bea: *(gasps)* Oh. I recognize that.

Glen: You do?

Bea: Yes. I...I knit that sock. *(pause)* And another one just like it.

Glen: No.

Bea: Yes.

Glen: You're teasing me.

Bea: No. I know it's mine. See this? This is something special I'd do. I'm sure no one else would do it just like that.

Glen: Wow. That is very strange.

Bea: I know.

Glen: It's amazing!

Bea: I know!

Glen: You knit this sock?

Bea: Yes!

Glen: And I got it!

Bea: Yes!

Glen: It's amazing!

Bea: I know!

Glen: Because this sock is very important to me.

Bea: It is?

Glen: Yep. It kept me going through the war.

Bea: Really? How?

Glen: 'Cause it protected what was most dear to me.

Bea: What?

Glen produces a locket rolled in the sock, opens it and shows Beatrice a picture.

Glen: This is my wife.

Bea: Wife?

Glen: Her name is Alice. I met her in London before going to fight. We got married just before I left and I carried this picture with me the whole time over. I'm sure I would have busted it without this sock. It's a real great sock. She's coming to Unity. She should be here in the spring.

Bea: Oh. She's pretty.

Glen: Oh, she's real swell. You'd like her, I'd bet.

Bea: I'd bet.

Glen: Well, Beatrice Wilde. I owe you.

Glen moves to hug Beatrice. He suddenly sneezes, pulls back, laughs. The threshing machine roars. Darkness.

Contributors

Amanda Ngozi Adichie was born and raised in Nigeria. Her fiction is forthcoming in the *Iowa Review*. She lives in Connecticut.

David Galef is a professor of English and the MFA program administrator at the University of Mississippi. He has published nine books including the novels *Flesh* and *Turning Japanese*, two children's books, two translated books of Japanese proverbs, and a critical study of flat and minor characters in literature. His most recent book is the short story collection *Laugh Track*.

Kevin Kerr is a Vancouver-based writer and a founding member and co-artistic director of the Electric Company Theatre—a creation based collective with whom he's co-written several plays including *Brilliant*, *The Wake*, *The Score*, and *Flop*. His recent play, *Unity (1918)*, was premiered by Touchstone Theatre in Vancouver in 2001, and will be published by Talon Books in the spring of 2002.

In 1956 **Tim Lander** was conscripted into the British army—who gave him a free ride to Malaya. He moved to Canada in 1964. He is a poet and a book designer, and supports himself as a whistler. “Whistling’s okay when you’re young and energetic, but it’s quite a different matter when you’re old and asthmatic.” (Marina Tsvetaeva, Lander’s translation)

Nancy Mattson, an Albertan living in London, England, has recently had poems in UK magazines and anthologies and an essay in *Going Some Place* (Regina: Coteau, 2000). “Girl Baby” is from a sequence, “Old Baby Tales,” in her current poetry manuscript *Writing With Mercury*. Her first poetry collection, *Maria Breaks Her Silence* (Coteau, 1989), was short-listed for the Gerald Lampert Award.

Mark Ryden received a BFA in 1987 from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. His paintings are treasured by collectors from Australia to Sweden. A few of his clients include Stephen King, Leonardo DiCaprio, Patrick Leonard, Ringo Starr, Danny Elfman, Kirk Hammett, Paul Leary, Chris Carter, Don Was, Kidada Jones, Bridget Fonda, Henry Selik, and the famous anti-mogul Long Gone John. Currently, Mark is living in a magic house in Sierra Madre, California, with his lovely wife Carolyn, his imaginative son Jasper, and sweet daughter Rosie. You can find him late at night in his studio among his many trinkets, statues, skeletons, saints, and old toys that he collects for inspiration.

Virgil Suárez was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1962. At the age of 12 he arrived in the United States. He is the author of two new poetry collections, *Palm Crows* (University of Arizona Press) and *Banyan* (LSU Press). This year *Guide to the Blue Tongue*, his sixth collection of poetry, will be published by the University of Illinois Press. He is the co-editor of the anthologies *American Diaspora: Poetry of Displacement* and *Like Thunder: Poetry of Violence in America*, both published by the University of Iowa Press. He divides his time between Key Biscayne and Tallahassee where he lives with his wife and daughters and teaches at The Florida State University.

Matthew Vollmer grew up in Andrews, North Carolina. He now lives with his wife in Lafayette, Indiana, where he teaches freshman composition and business writing at Purdue University. His recent work has appeared, or will appear, in *New Letters*, *Paris Review*, and *Tin House*.

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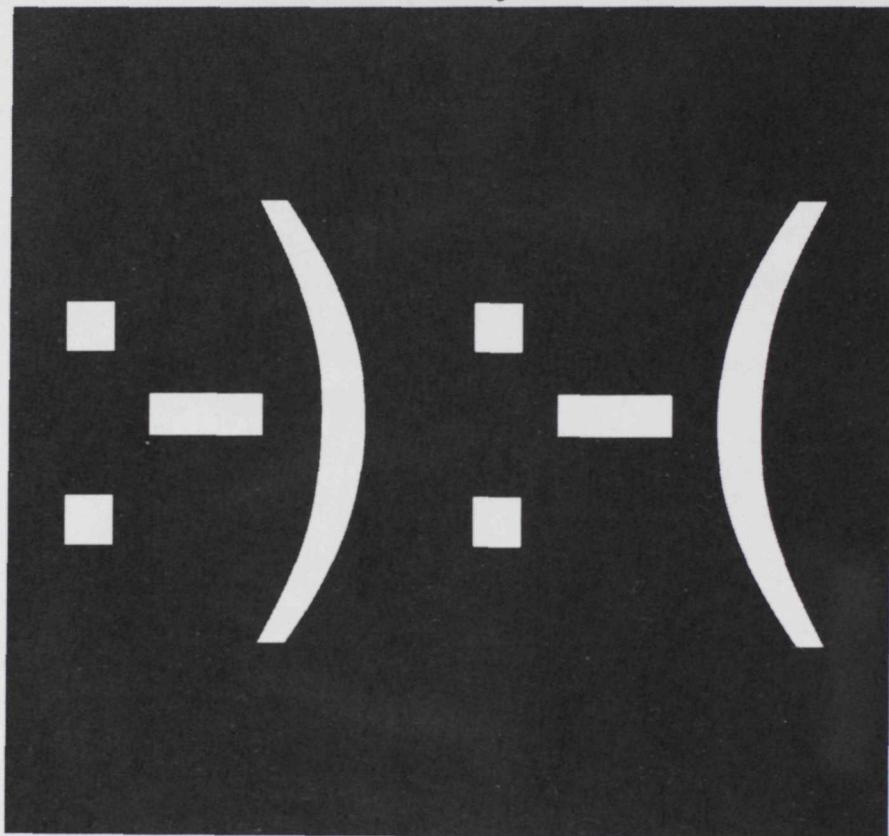
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CANADA

Although I should go down to the Atrium to snag one of those fly Thai salads that Richie Valens (dude has the LaBamba look down to a T) fits so beautifully into a transparent plastic cube (aesthetically pleasing AND mobile), I don't. Instead, I crush up and snort three Ritalin (sorry, Mom, if you're reading this, I know you're against me snorting my pharms)...

— Matthew Vollmer, Page 13

Amanda Ngozi Adichie
David Galef
Kevin Kerr
Tim Lander
Nancy Mattson
Virgil Suárez
Matthew Vollmer



Cover Art:
***Balloon Boy* by Mark Ryden**

