

PRISM

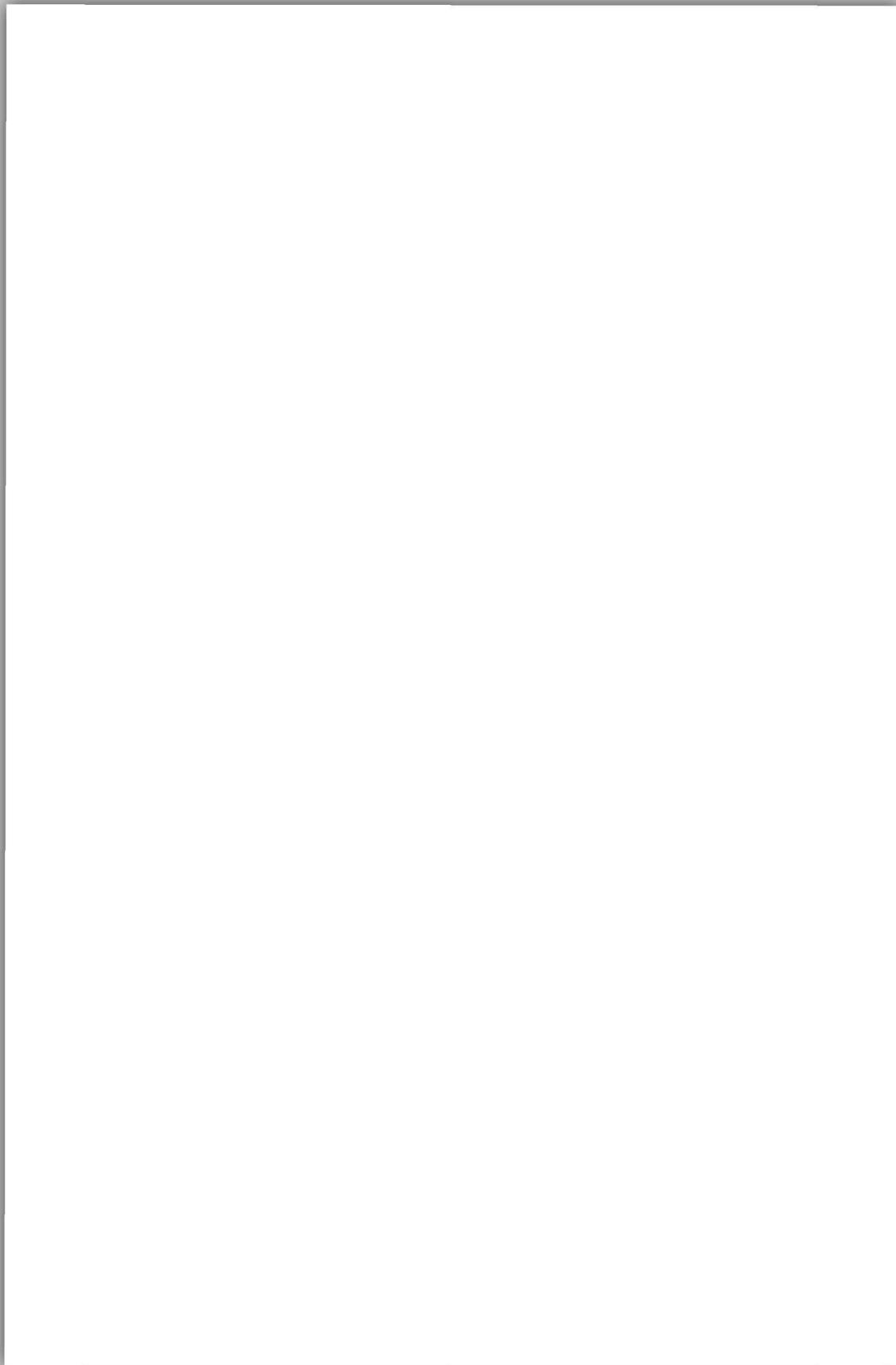
INTERNATIONAL



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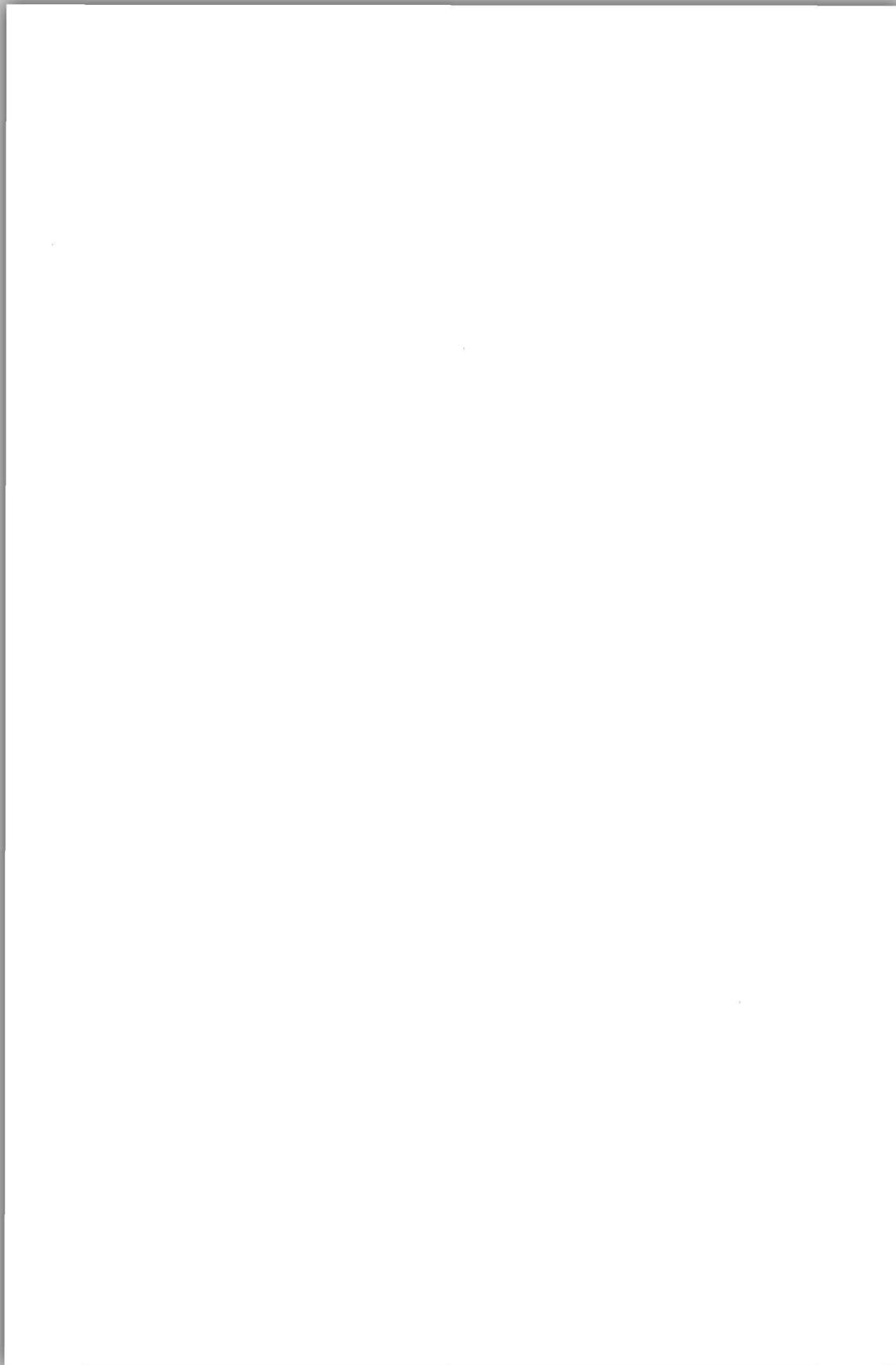
CONTEMPORARY WRITING FROM
CANADA AND AROUND THE WORLD

36:3



PRISM

INTERNATIONAL



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Good Friday

(for T.)

think instead
pasquale
of black earth
sweet, tender
opening to sun
after the last snow
damp brown prairie
grass coiled flat
around new seedlings
waiting to burst
think of elms
stretching
their ancient arms
skyward
laced with new twigs
pregnant swollen
purple buds
think, *pasquale*
of gophers standing
at attention
at their dirt doors
saluting the sun
ecstatic, dignified
comical
not remembering yet
our childish cruel
game of guns
our new light blue
cotton dresses
risky low square
necklines &
gathered sleeves
sewn by our mothers
barely covering
our tingling new
breasts, the cousins

running in the yard
their fresh haircuts
& breaking voices
& itchy limbs
& baseball gloves
the uncles drinking
surreptitious wine
in the basement
before dinner
in white shirts
& bared arms
jostling each other
with mild oaths
the women at the tomb
wearing black hats
& mourning bands
the stone rolled away
the angel pointing
into the white air
our grandfather
dead in his deep
grave, unresurrected
our new shoes
wet with prairie mud
christ's body
broken & flayed
the dying god
wept over, again
by our mothers
their long line
of tragic, perfect
loves
that moment
of pure dark black
before the inevitable
surprising turn
into spring
everything dead new
alive again
his stern veins
flowing on in us
giddy, foolish
hungry
eager, unsaved

Songline

having walked halfway
across the world
stumbling
to find you among these weeds
joyful in their unregenerate
wildness
as you & i are, also
lying here together
in this weedy patch
brambly & overgrown
& blown through
by high wind
i am
broken in two
half exiled, half home
mourning my lost seven selves
with their particular griefs
their precise shadows
visible fault lines
thinning here across
the horizon
of this small meadow
rimmed by trees
scrub brush
& *pale ribbed clouds*
grey, on grey, on grey
these stately cottonwoods
rustling
familiar & strange
this clodded earth
not mine, not mine
& yet having been found
here
by the wind, these weeds & you
my heart cracking open
broken
my foreign skin singing
i am yours, & theirs, & no one's
the wind's
blissfully, keening

Karen Shklanka

July 1: Moose Factory, Ontario

It's Canada Day somewhere between black flies
and mosquitoes, nobody but tourists,
when I'm called from home to stitch up James
who woke bleeding on a battlefield of empties,
limp friends. He walked to the hospital
though he didn't feel any pain,
yet. Blood-clotted hair holds edges of scalp,
I feel his skull through the wound.
He doesn't want me to shave his head.
I suture—curved needle, 2-O Nylon, big bites.

My beeper whines. It's not Ward 2
needing Tylenol for Mrs. Kataquapit's forgotten arthritis,
it's not Emergency. It is an outside call.
It is Phil, says he's been sitting all morning with a gun to his head.
Last time I picked him up by snowmobile,
today he offers to walk to my house.

When he arrives I think he is the most beautiful man I've ever seen
though one of his front teeth is cracked and black
so he smiles with his mouth closed.
His brown eyes look right through me.
I want to take his shiny hair in my hands
but I am his doctor, his wife's doctor.
We hug, hips held back a little.
I make tea.

His silk shirt wrinkled from the night before,
he greets my eager husky,
tells me stories of his grandfather's dogsled postal service
then he speaks of the pot, the hash, the coke,
says booze isn't a problem,
got fired, sold his CDs, stole from Mom,
wife had an affair, grandfather died of cancer,
friend killed on a snowmobile after leaving a party drunk,
the usual,
and I listen.

Feet up on the railing, he sits on my porch
watching tourists stroll the dusty road
as I run to the hospital
and back. I am silent.
He talks and talks
soft Cree accent peeling away my quiet.

Shadows lengthen, we walk to the school yard
full of squealing kids, feathers, balloons, drumming.
My beeper pinches, I run home, dial the hospital.
Switchboard transfers me to emergency—
James is back, feeling the pain now, shaking, can't sleep.
I hesitate before going in.
The nurse laughs, then matter-of-fact—
the liquor store's closed,
a six-pack of Valium'll take care of his pain until Monday.
I grab my stethoscope, supper—Canada Day bannock from the fridge.
The twenty dollar bill on my kitchen counter
has disappeared.

On my walk to the hospital laughter
drifts from schoolyard celebrations,
a white balloon blows down the empty street.

Guillermo Verdecchia

A Day in the Life of Thomas Macomber

He's trying to get it right so he can explain it later. On the screen people wander through a field of trash. They live off the garbage dump. They pick through stuff in the dump and sell it. Or use it. Or something. They live there, on the dump. Or maybe not quite *on* the dump. It's hard to tell exactly because they're talking Spanish or Mexican or whatever and it's hard to read the words of the translation of what they're saying. Subtitles. That's what they're called. Sometimes the subtitles disappear against the background. Or maybe his eyes are going. Doubtful with all the pot he smokes. That's good for your eyes. Glaucoma. Or something. Terminal eye patients get dope as a medicinal function. Totally. So it can't be his eyes. It's the subtitles. They should invent some kind of system where the subtitles change colour depending on the colour that's in the background. *He* should invent it. Make a lot of money if you could do something like that. Like if the garbage dump is brown, then the subtitles could be the opposite colour.

"What's the opposite of brown?"

No answer.

It's somewhat of a downer this TV program. Or maybe it's the dope. Lately, whenever he tokes up, Tom gets depressed. Of course watching documentaries about garbage dump dwellers doesn't help. It's fucking terrible. Like all those panhandlers on the street now. You can hardly turn around without bumping into somebody who's bumming for change. And every other person who isn't panhandling is rooting through the garbage or recycling looking for beer bottles or whatever. There were like fourteen Indians in the alley the other day, looking for bottles. But they lost out 'cause old Mrs. Chow was already through them all at like five in the morning. With two giant bags on a pole that she carried across her back. That's why he prefers to drive. Avoid the panhandlers.

"Dad, I wanna dig a grave for Rascal."

"Jesus, Michael, you scared the crap out of me." The kid's gotten really quiet lately. Taking to sneaking around. He just shows up in the room, like a ghost. Freaky.

"Can we bury Rascal today?"

“What?”
“Can we bury Rascal today?”
“Hey, what’s the opposite of brown?”
“Daaaad.”
“What?”
“Can we?”
“What?”
“Bury Rascal.”
“Where’s your mum?”
No answer. Spooky.

Michael is training. He is getting better and better at slipping in and out of rooms, houses, yards and conversations unnoticed. The ninja, Michael knows, is master of stealth and secrecy, silent as a cat, leaving no trace of his passage. Inside his kangaroo jacket pocket, he feels for his *shuriken*: deadly throwing stars, often coated with poison, favoured by the ninja. Nine of them. An auspicious number.

The Old Man is getting slower, Michael thinks. Stupider, too. From all the dope he smokes. It will not be long now before The Tong comes. Michael will not defend The Old Man. He will not be sad when they take him, cut off his head and stick it on a *yari* for all to see. The ninja is loyal to no one but himself. Stupid Old Man.

Ninja Michael sits on his front step watching ordinary people walk by. He could kill them with a silent flick of his wrist. But he doesn’t.

It would be something like when they colour in old movies. Colorizing. They could do the same thing with the subtitles. You do the regular subtitling. Then you go back and Colorize them. But you could do it way simpler now. With computers. You just program when to change the colour depending on when the background changes and it does it automatically. It’s so simple. He’s amazed no one’s thought of it until now.

That would be so much better than the way they work now. And also better than movies that are dubbed. That’s the worst, when their mouths are moving and it’s so obviously not what they’re saying that you’re hearing. That looks retarded. On the TV, a dog is making funny faces. He loves this commercial. He laughs.

“What’s so funny?” Lori asks, dragging shopping bags into the house.

“Hey, where have you been?”

“I went to the bank.”

“In what city?”

“In this city, smarty-pants. I had other stuff to do, too. What’s so funny?”

“It’s that commercial with the mental dog that—”

She comes into the living room.

"Tom. This place is a dump."

"What?" He was supposed to clean up the living room. That's why he was in here in the first place. Now he remembers. Shit.

"The living room is a dump. I asked you when I left to clean it up. Look, you got your shit everywhere."

"It's not everywhere. It's not just my stuff."

"I asked you. Jesus. It's not much to ask."

Flick. The first *shuriken* goes flying. Deadly accuracy. The man crumples silently to the ground.

"What the hell have you been doing all afternoon then?"

"I've been watching this doc—it's really interesting. People living off— Look, it's the weekend. It's a day off. I'll get around to it."

Flick. Another *shuriken*. Another dead body. A ninja feels no pity, no remorse, no sorrow.

"When?"

"Jesus, what's the hurry? I'll do it now."

My sister's coming over. That's all."

"Well, I didn't know that."

"You did so. I told you about eighteen times."

"You did not." She did so.

"I did so."

"No, you didn't. I think I'd remember that."

Outside, the sidewalk is littered with dead bodies. Ninja Michael turns his back on the carnage, calmly walks past the squabbling Old People to his bed chamber. They do not notice him. To empty his mind, Ninja Michael draws in his notebook. A city scene: roads, cars.

"Did you get rid of Rascal?"

"What?"

"Did you at least bury the dog?"

"Hey, don't yell at me."

"You didn't, did you? I told you, I'm sick of having that dog in my freezer."

"Hey, stop yelling. People can hear you, you know."

"Is Michael home?"

"Yeah. I don't know. I guess. Michael?"

She shushes him. "Don't call him, you idiot. I didn't know he was home. I wouldn't've talked about the dog like that if I knew he was home. D'ya

think he heard me?"

"Probably. The whole city probably heard you."

Ninja Michael adds houses and apartment buildings to his drawing. Stores, people walking, birds in the sky. Construction in one corner.

Inexplicably, Tom finds himself in the kitchen. Did he already clean up the living room? Why doesn't he do things like he says he will? He unpacks the groceries she bought. Cookies. Excellent.

"Would you leave that? Go clean up the living room."

"I'm just trying to help." Crumbs fall from his mouth.

"You can help by cleaning up the living room. And then you can bury Rascal. I told you yesterday I wanted him out of the freezer and I told Michael we could bury him in the back yard."

"I think he was asking something about that."

"Of course, I told him we could do it."

"In the back yard?"

"Yeah."

"Is that..." He searches for the right word. He searches for a long time. "Safe?"

"Safe? Of course it's safe."

"Well, what if something digs it up?"

"What, like a voodoo guy?"

"Yeah, make a zombie."

They're smiling at each other now.

"Rascal, you are a zombie. Your soul is mine to command. Go piss on Mrs. Chow's cabbage."

They're laughing now. Michael cannot hear them. He is finishing his drawing. A Chinese Crested (a rare hairless breed) rushes out into the busy street and is crushed under the wheels of a car that does not stop. Two blocks away, a little boy is looking for the dog. The little boy goes in the wrong direction and finds the dog much, much later. On the boulevard. He draws the person, a Good Samaritan, who stopped to check the dog and remove him from the road. The Good Samaritan is in her car seeing the accident. She can see it happening because she has long lines of sight coming straight out of her eyes. All-seeing, alert.

Tracy, Lori, and Tom sit in the back yard, drinking beer. The sun is low enough to be in their eyes. Tracy is talking.

"It's one of the sacred places of the planet."

"Oh yeah?" Tom shields his eyes so he can see her better.

"Uh huh. Paul has this book with all the sacred places and it's in there."

I'm totally excited to be going. It has amazing energy, right? I mean spiritual energy?"

"Cool." Tracy has nice tits. He can see her bra. It's shiny, pretty. She's smiling.

"Sacred for whom?" Lori asks, putting an extra hum on the final phoneme.

"For everybody."

"What makes it sacred? I mean, why is it in this book?"

"Well, it's a book of all these special places, these sacred spaces, on the planet and it's one of them."

"Right." Tom is smiling and nodding his head like one of those dolls with the springy heads. At least he tidied the living room.

"Is this one of the UN places?"

"What?"

"One of the places, you know, World Heritage Places, designated by the UN?"

"The UN?"

"The United Nations?"

"Yeah, I know what the UN is, Lori."

"What difference does it make if the UN says it's designated?" Tom asks.

"I'm just asking. I'm trying to understand."

"What's to understand?" Tracy finishes her beer. "It's this gorgeous place with great energy."

"Yeah, what more do you need to know?" Tom agrees.

"Maybe it's a sacred burial ground."

"Oh," Tracy jumps. "Michael, where did you come from?"

"My little ninja," Lori smiles and brushes the hair from his eyes. He pulls away.

"Mom. Don't."

"Hi, Michael. How are you?"

"Hey, Aunty Trace. Where's Uncle Paul?"

He's not really your uncle, Tom thinks. He hates that: Uncle Paul. What is it? It's 'cause he's not around so he's special. It's way easier to be an uncle than a father. Fathers have to do all the crap stuff. Uncles just cruise in whenever, birthday, Christmas, take you for a ride on their motorcycle and that's it. Pals forever.

"Oh, he's working tonight."

"Is he coming by to get you later?"

"No, I've got the car."

"You want a burger, Mike?"

"Not hungry," he growls and walks away slowly.

"Gosh, he's cute. Getting so big," Tracy says.

"Yeah, he's growing up." A silence settles with the sunlight.

"Hey, you guys want to smoke a mighty doob?" Tom asks this as much to break the silence as out of desire for more.

"Mmmm. Sure." Tracy smiles. "If I can have another beer."

"You got it."

Inside the house he can hear Tracy and Lori laughing. About what? Sisters. There is a strange thing there. Something he is not privy to, something he does not know or understand. Maybe he left the spliff on the bookshelf.

"Are we gonna bury Rascal?"

"Jeeezuz, Michael. You can't do that. You gotta make some noise when you walk. What?"

"When can we bury Rascal?"

"I don't know. Tomorrow?"

"Tonight."

"No, not tonight. We have company."

"Aunty Trace won't mind."

"Tomorrow." He finds the joint and goes into the kitchen to get more beer. "Hey," he calls out the back door, "what's the opposite of brown?"

Tom and Lori walk down to the curb to see Tracy off. Lori leans in the car window, still talking. Tom hangs back, his hands in the pockets of his shorts. They wave goodbye when Tracy drives away and then turn around to return to the house. Michael is standing there. Holding something in his arms. The dog.

"Michael."

"I want to bury him."

"Honey," Lori says, "It's late now. We'll do it tomorrow."

"You said we'd do it today."

"I know honey, but."

"I wanna do it now. He needs to be buried properly."

"Okay," Lori says.

Somehow, Tom does the digging even though it was Lori that agreed. He moves two large rocks with his hands. The only light comes from the back porch and Michael insists on lighting candles. He sings a strange little song and shuttles to and fro around the burial site.

"Shit. This is—I don't know if this is deep enough."

"Six feet under," Michael says. "It must be six feet."

"I'm not digging six feet."

"Rascal, oh my Rascal, we bestow your body to this ground," Michael says. Tom wonders where he gets these things. He watches Michael, normally withdrawn, suddenly expressive, his face alive with something: ceremony, mystery? Kids are wild, he thinks.

"Now raise the candle," Michael commands. Tom bends over, groans, picks up the candle in its holder. It throws irregular shadows across the boy's face and the plastic-wrapped dog's body he holds in his arms. He was a sweet little dog. His nails skittered across the linoleum. He could jump like nobody's business. Poor thing. Michael climbs into the hole, places the body in the centre of the pit, then climbs back out. He crouches by the side of the hole, says, "Bye-bye, Rascal."

Tom throws a clod of earth in. It falls against the plastic. Tom shivers. He throws another shovelful in. He feels sad. Why did the little dog have to die? He feels stupid. Maybe it's the doob. Another mouthful of dirt. He's crying. It's been a sad day. The whole day, though he can't remember why. Hot tears run down his nose. Stupid. Lori has gone inside so she doesn't know and the little ninja crouched at his feet only stares fixedly at the dirt piling up in the hole. He pushes the dirt in quickly now, awkwardly. He's doing a lousy job of it. Well, there's no light. How're you supposed to fill in a hole in the dark?

He pushes the friable dirt with his foot. It stinks. He stands a moment thinking that he doesn't want to see it in the morning, a newly dug grave in the back yard. After Michael goes to bed, he'll put the kid's swimming pool over top of it. Michael is still crouched, his head against his knees, one hand on the mound of dirt. He's humming quietly. Then Michael abruptly gets up, walks away, apparently no longer interested.

"Good night, Michael," mumbles Tom. He wipes his face with his T-shirt sleeve, tosses the shovel aside. He tries to pick up the swimming pool but it is round, plastic, filled with water, and, therefore, slippery, unmanageable, and immovable. Tom grunts, curses, and flicks his hands at the pool as if dismissing it. Before he turns around, a voice calls quietly, "Dad?"

He turns. Michael is standing on the steps of the back porch, half-dressed in pyjamas, his little boy's chest exposed to the cool air. "Michael."

"Thanks. For doing that."

"Oh, no problem." Tom turns back to regard the grave. "We can fix it tomorrow, pack down the earth, when there's more light. I tried to put the swimming pool on it, but maybe some grass seed would be better, eh? Or flowers?" He turns back to Michael, hoping the boy will see his smile through the darkness. Michael has gone, vanished silently into the house.

Tom picks up the shovel. Leans it carefully against the rickety tool shed. He goes in. He adjusts the kitchen light just so that it casts a low, warm light and sits at the kitchen table. From upstairs he can hear Lori and Michael talking as Michael gets ready for bed. He can't make out what they're saying but the sound of their voices creates an agreeable murmur. He listens to them and looks at his dirty hands, rubs his index finger. For a moment he has the impression that his life is very rich and that all is as it should be.

The Dog's Prescription

What he needs, my step-
mother says, is a good
whack between the eyes.

Days when coffee's brewed
on yesterday's grounds or car's
stalled in front of the laundromat
where hope shrinks
with each loonie

& the little girl next
door peeks through the rotten
fence, saying, is he what you'd call
your baby?

those days, you'd swallow
whatever it takes
to still the heart's
dogged worm.

August, an Epilogue

One day a woman will walk
through a door
she misplaced.

There's a chill
but she'll twist the coils
till the radiators stir.

There are walls
of planks still
settling on their studs.

She'll take a broom or rinse
the dusty bucket.
Turn mirrors around.
She'll know the faces
in the pictures &
some of them were hers.

She'll find a comb on the sill with
hairs still in it.
Yes, one day it won't make
a difference. She'll head
through the blue fields & drop
the fist of hair
into backwater.

The poppies will nod
paper heads aflame.

When she spies the ash-grey
nest, between shelf &
chimney, she won't disturb it.
There's company in hornet noise.
In the clock's logic; her own
dull breath.

As pines eat sun, she'll push
peas from skins with her thumb
or grease the tumblers
of all four locks.

Next time the boys come
to drag the lake,
she won't confess
to anything.

Kendra Fanconi & Gary Young
in collaboration with Foursight Theatre

Naked Wedding

A note about the script: Foursight Theatre brought us together: two actors, two writers, two designers, a choreographer, and a composer. At that point we had just a title. That's it. Twelve weeks later we had a show. This script is rich with the contributions of performers Sue Pendlebury and Ajay India, design team Bouge de là!, choreographer Liz Rankin, composer Jeff Corness, and rescue director Kate Hale.

A note about the set: there are two pieces which turn and fold, rather like origami, to suggest tables, beds, drawers, washing machines, etc.

A note about the style: poetic but naturalistic. Emotional subtext is often unwound in the dance sections that punctuate the piece.

A note about the music: original music accompanies most of the dance sections. Sometimes the text itself is recorded and 'composed.' This is referred to in the stage directions as 'soundscape.'

Cast of characters: SHE is a thirty-year-old, single, white British female. HE is a thirty-year-old, single, Indian male. His parents are both from India; he was born in Britain.

PART ONE: THE MEETING

In a launderette. SHE is sorting her laundry. HE is watching his washing. SHE is on soundscape. HE is live.

HE: Walking into the launderette is like entering the belly of a lion. The thick purr of the washers and the warm breath of the dryers. It's a comfort.

My dad was an odd sock. A mismatch for my mother. So, they kept their distance. She refused to leave the house while he fidgeted on the front

SHE: 1994—The Year of the Cock. An accountant, an artist, an aerobics instructor, and an alcoholic. Assholes!

steps. She'd pile up the dirty clothes and he'd ask "Who wants to come to the river?" and he'd cross-walk to the Laundromat holding me under his overcoat. This overcoat.

He'd load up the washing machines. "Have you brought your trunks?" he'd ask. "Do you want to go in for a swim?" and he'd pick me up by the ears and try to topload me. "Watch out for piranhas," was his warning and I'd squeal. He'd punch in coins and, sitting me on his lap, he'd say, "I'll race you down the Nile."

I'd press my face against the glass and watch the water. "But is the Nile orange and green like my school uniform?" "There's every colour in it," he'd say, "You just look." And he'd show me tangerine waves and apple eddies. We'd swim through the prewash. As the water got agitated, I'd get scared and he'd say, "Hold on to my heels, I'll take you through." He taught me strategies for whirlpools.

What I hate about coming to the launderette these days is I always come alone.

They meet in the washing machine. Washing machine music and dance. Love and bubbles. SHE exits embarrassed and excited.

HE: I was out there in singles land muttering that common form of prayer, "Please let me meet someone tonight." And there she was. I can be your dream man. I can be sweet as a pebble and tough as tarmac, I'm smarter than Pinter, cooler than winter, I'm Percy the poet and sexy like butter.

HE exits.

1995—The Year of the Dog. A biker, a bartender, a banker, a brain and a basket case. Big disappointments.

1996—The Year of the Pig. The married man. He left me a mess.

1997—The Year of the Rat. "Can I bum a smoke? Another? Ten bucks? Twenty? And what's for dinner?" On his way out he swiped my jewelry. Enough of these animals.

1998—Waiting to find a Man for this year.

PART TWO—DRESSING UP

SHE: I wonder what he's like. I wonder if he wants children. I wonder what's his favourite colour? I wonder what side of the bed does he like to sleep on? I wonder will this time be different?

I wonder if he'll take me to India? On holiday to Goa? Lying in the sun while he peels me lichees and peels off my bikini? I wonder, will he wet me with mango juice then rub and roll me in the golden sand until I'm a Buddha statuette smiling with perfect contentment? I wonder will he worship me like that, placing petals and sweetmeats at my feet? I'm wondering can he Kama Sutra me—365 ways in a year? I wonder if he levitates? Or if he's from Peckham.

I wonder what will tonight be like? Is he rich? Will he take me back to his place? To his house in the country? And stretch me across Persian rugs the size of football fields, all Hallowe'en orange and fire-glow red, and chill me in front of a log fire? Will he come out of the kitchen with a knife, razor-blade sharp, and a wide-as-Jack-Nicholson smile? Will he mad-axe me to the floor, and psycho-killer me ketchup dead? He's bolted the doors and I can't get out, I can't get out, Help me, help me out, it's dark in here!

What if he doesn't turn up at all? And leaves me waiting at the restaurant? I'll arrive and the waiter will show me to my seat and take my coat. And I'll be sitting there with that "I'm waiting for a friend" look on my face, sipping water with snooty waiters. And I'll be waiting and waiting because it was a joke all along. And he'll send a friend to videotape me and later that evening they will be candid-camera watching me, over and over again. Laughing and laughing and laughing at me.

What time is it? I wonder, am I going to be late?

PART THREE—FIRST DATE

At a restaurant.

HE: I don't know what to say.

SHE: How about hello?

HE: Oh, hello.

SHE: Hello. What should we do now?

HE: Dinner?

HE: So, what do you do?

SHE: I'm a musician. I play with a group.

HE: I'm an environmentalist.

SHE: Oh. I've never been to India.

HE: Oh.

SHE: I like excitement. I like to go out, see my friends.

HE: I like to cook for other people. I hold dinner parties. I'm tired of take-aways.

SHE: I'm tired of plastic forks and greasy spoons. I'm ready for some home cooking.

HE: I watch my weight.

SHE: I jog every morning. I run in circles. I chase my tail. I exhaust myself.

HE: I walk on coals.

SHE: I burn toast.

HE: I keep my cool.

SHE: I drink coffee not cappuccino.

HE: I'm not fussy.

SHE: Lager not stout, tea—no milk, no sugar and I pour.

HE: I love tea parties.

SHE: I smoke like a man.

HE: I stretch like a rubber band. But I can snap.

SHE: I drive fast.

HE: Mmn. I fasten seat belts.

SHE: Really? I masturbate sharks.

Music. They meet under the table. She as shark, he as fish, and almost kiss. Then back to the restaurant.

BOTH: I'm a listener,
I actually like doing the dishes,
I quit smoking,
I start up,
I quit, I start,
I fast, I feast,
I most, I least.
I pack it in and go for a drink.
I pee in public pools,
I never initiate a breakup.
I like it when it's intense.

Music. The courtship is progressing. SHE exits. Music ends.

HE: I wonder exactly why she wants to be with me? Is she just admiring the tea stain of my hand in hers?

My last girlfriend and I spent a good four years running around the mulberry bush. She just found it exciting to French kiss a man with two tongues. She liked my colour as if it was a flavour of ice cream, oblivious to the weight of making love when you've got a subcontinent on your back. I tried to explain myself and ended up eating my own guts and asking for more. I had to get out before I ate myself alive.

I know how to hide. I know how to white out my mistakes. It's almost my duty to do so if I pick so fair a flower. So I'll bite my mother tongue when I speak. I'll bleach my sighs. I'll play it cool and not spray my problems around like bullets. Be in the here and now, not the history of when and where. You've got the charm, you've got the smarts, you've got the job, now get the girl.

Music. A photo album of their first two months together.

PART FOUR—HOLDING OUT

HE: We've played charades, backgammon, Scrabble, Ludo, Cluedo, Monopoly, Mousetrap, hide and seek, draughts...only one game left. And she won't play. Apparently she is very good at it. The amount of practice she's had. She says it's different this time. The rules have changed since then.

SHE: Let's play bits.

SHE puts a pair of pantyhose on her arms and over her head. SHE throws him a pair of men's long johns which HE wears in a similar fashion. Both flop over a waist-high screen and put their hands on the floor. Arms imitate legs and their faces become talking "bits."

HER BITS: So, what do you do?

HIS BITS: Most of the time I am happy to stay where I am. Nestled in my pubic nest. Some days I am the dog that takes my master for a walk. I put a ring through his nose, and strain at the leash, and walk him round the houses. I sniff at your door. I ring your bell and cooie through your letter box. And you, Valerie?

HER BITS: Me? I only catch glimpses of the world through the bars of her legs. I've been out with you before. But I'm a homebody now. I stay in, feed the chickens, collect the eggs. I'm always redecorating my womb. I do my exercises. I can tighten like a necktie and release like a shaken-up can of Sprite. We want a nice tight fit so we can hold on to the next one. I am 'O' as in "Oh, my God!", "O, for the Wings of a Dove," and "O, Christmas Tree." I am that 'O.'

HIS BITS: O, baby.

HER BITS: O, no you don't. Put your socks and shoes back on. I am the

whole as in the whole nine yards.
HIS BITS: I'm a whole nine inches.
HER BITS: Mmm-hmm. And I can tap dance.
HIS BITS: Really?
HER BITS: No, but I can fake it.
HIS BITS: You wouldn't have to fake it with me.

HE pulls off her pantyhose and leads HER to the set which unfolds into a bed.

PART FIVE—SEX

HE: You come at me and grab me by the throat. The others they just make up the numbers. You're not the paint-by-numbers type. You are not one of those extras. You stand there waiting for your close-up with a pillar box grin outlined in devil-may-care red. You're like a big cat let out of its cage. The urge to put my hands between the bars is just too much to bear. I want to kiss and caress and have you drag me round the block. I want to hear you purr.

SHE: After it's begun I begin to hear the hum of the
Come kitty, come kitty, come kitty, come.
The thrum and hum makes a hymn that comes with its
Come ditty, come ditty, come did he, come?

I wait, replete,
Growing fingers on my feet,
Feeling yap, yope, yelp,
At the pelting in my pelt.

It's the hymn that I summon,
There is singing to be done!
And it's ringing in the cave in the backside of the drum,
When he comes, did he come, did he come, did he come?

SHE: A curled tight tail, a long line of leg...

HE: ...a fold, a patch of hair...

SHE: ...a dimple, a nestle...

HE: ...a scrape, a suck...

SHE: ...a soft sound...

HE: ...a line of spine...

SHE: ...a dribble of juice...

HE: ...a suction, a whistled breath, a chug.

SHE: When I could pull your teeth out...

HE: ...pull your hair out with the need to have and to hold till death...

BOTH: *breath*

PART SIX—A COUPLE THAT COOKS TOGETHER...

With the tenderness and excitement that characterizes a new relationship.

SHE: I'll chop and you cook. You'll need more veg than that.

HE: Onion?

SHE: Thank you. *(They kiss)*

HE: Coriander?

SHE: You don't have coriander in Thai food.

HE: Oh. I'll chop the onions.

SHE: No, it's fine.

HE: You are beautiful when you cry.

SHE: Fuck you very much.

HE: Do you want tomatoes?

SHE: Don't cut the tomatoes. That's why I was boiling the water. To take the skins off first.

HE: Do you want a glass of wine? *(Table turns into a bed)* What are we having for dessert?

SEX—THREE MONTHS LATER

With the hollowness that characterizes the onset of habit within a relationship.

SHE: What's on the menu?

HE: First, an appetizer of lips and hips and nipples. Then to the main course. Together we can whet our appetites and tear chunks off each other and drink and eat and nibble and chew and tear handfuls and mouthfuls and armfuls until we can eat no more. And we lie with extended tongues sprawled out on white bed sheets.

HE finishes.

SHE: I'll have the house special, please.

HE: Are you still hungry?

SHE: I always have seconds.

HE: Just give me a minute.

SHE: Shall I give you the recipe?

After it's begun I begin to hear the hum of the
Come kitty, come kitty, come kitty, come.
The thrum and hum makes a hymn that comes with its
Come ditty, come ditty, come did he, come?

SHE finishes.

HE: A curled tight tail...

SHE: A scrape, a suck...

HE: A dribble of juice...

SHE: A suction, a chug.

SAME OLE COOKING SCENE...

With the hollowness that characterizes the onset of habit within a relationship.

SHE: I'll chop and you cook. You'll need more veg than that.

HE: Onion?

SHE: Thank you.

HE: Coriander?

SHE: You don't have coriander in Thai food.

HE: Oh. I'll chop the onions.

SHE: No, I don't mind.

HE: You are beautiful when you cry.

SHE: Fuck you very much.

HE: Do you want tomatoes?

SHE: Don't cut the tomatoes. That's why I was boiling the water. To take the skins off. Now all of the skins will be in.

HE: Do you want a glass of wine? (*Table turns into the bed*) What are we having for dessert?

SAME OLE SEX SCENE...

With the tension that characterizes the recognition of habit within a relationship.

SHE: What's on the menu?

HE: First an appetizer of hips and lips and nipples.

SHE: After it's begun, I begin to hear the hum

Of the come kitty, come ditty, come did he come?

HE: Did you come?

SHE: Did you?

HE: Yes.

SHE: Good.

HE: Do you want me to help?

SHE: After it's begun, I begin to hear the hum...

HE: Did you come?

SHE: You'll need more veg than that.

After it's begun, I begin to hear the hum...

HE: Did you come?

SHE: You'll need more veg than that. Come on kitty, come, come, come.

HE: Did you come?

SHE: (*Bored*) Dum ditty, dum ditty, dum, dum, dum.

HE: Did you come?

SHE: Veg!

COOKING KILLS...

With the tension that characterizes the recognition of habit within a relationship.

SHE: I'll chop and you cook. You'll need more veg than that.

HE: Onion?

SHE: Thank you.

HE: Coriander?

SHE: You don't have coriander in Thai food.

HE: Oh. I'll chop the onions.

SHE: No, I don't mind.

HE: You are beautiful when you cry.

SHE: Fuck you very much.

HE: Do you want tomatoes?

SHE: Don't cut the tomatoes. That's why I was boiling the water. To take the skins off. Now all of the skins will be in.

HE: Do you want a glass of wine? (*Table turns into the bed*) What are we having for dessert?

SHE: Spinach.

HE: What's wrong?

SHE: Nothing.

HE: Is something burning?

PART SEVEN—IF YOU CAN'T STAND THE HEAT...

SHE is in the kitchen. HE is on the bed.

SHE: We need to talk.

HE: Come over here.

SHE: I want to talk! Talk! Tell me things.

HE: You look beautiful.

SHE: No, tell me things about you. Do you want children?

HE: Maybe.

SHE: What's your favourite colour?

HE: Don't have one.

SHE: Tell me a secret.

HE: I think I might like to marry you.

SHE: Jesus, we need to talk.

HE: Talk to me.

SHE: No, you talk to me. What were you like as a kid? In school?

HE: Same as I am now. A bit smaller.

SHE: What about at home? What are your parents like? What about your father, what's he like?

HE: He likes beautiful women. I'm just like him.

SHE: What's his name? Where does he live? What does he do?

HE: What does it matter?

SHE: Don't you ever get angry?

HE: What's to get angry about?

SHE: What about with me, don't you ever want to throttle me?

HE: I love you.

SHE: Don't you seethe and rage and spit and swear?

HE shrugs.

SHE: Don't you get fed up, and slam doors, and scream with frustration and want to punch people and shit on people and seek revenge and get your way...

HE: I guess I'm just a calm guy.

SHE: Does that mean you can't talk to me?

SHE: I haven't had my dessert.

SHE pushes him away.

PART EIGHT—MY BOTTOM DRAWER

SHE begins rifling through her bottom drawer, through mementoes from her past lovers.

SHE: I keep all of my ex-lovers in the bottom drawer. Sometimes—if he's not around and I am in a thoughtful mood I will pull out old Jim (*pulls out a pair of boxer shorts*). He was a thinker, an artist. Back in there, Jim, I am in a stinking mood. Let's pull out Roger the bartender (*pulls out a G-string*). I hated Roger but the sex was good. He was like a fucking labrador. Full of bounding enthusiasm but deeply annoying. I like to dip my finger in and taste these things from the past. There is nothing wrong with it, it's a harmless indulgence, a tiny piece of private property in our communal life. He'll never be all my men. He'll never be my long-haired piece of Eurotrash, my bad boy with a bike just like Juan (*pulls out a pair of long underwear which become motorcycle handlebars*). I take secret spins down memory lane with him. I could never let on. He would wilt. He'd think they stole a kiss and never gave it back. He'd wonder which were the ways he wasn't good enough. He wasn't funny enough, sexy enough,

rich enough, open enough. Like you, I don't know what your name is yet. You are the one who pours love into me like milk from a wide-mouthed jug. If he knew about you—he'd howl like a panther and cry like a baby in the middle of the night. I believe in honesty but this is not the kind of thing to be honest about. Maybe I'll give Roger a call.

HE enters and she quickly stuffs everything back into the drawer.

HE: Are you hungry? Would you like pasta? A big curry?

SHE: Whatever you want.

HE: I could get out the fondue pot, we've got some Gruyere.

SHE: I'll just have a sandwich.

HE: Okay, I do this great sandwich with artichoke hearts and red peppers...

SHE: No. Forget it. I'm not hungry.

HE: I thought you wanted a sandwich.

SHE: I'll just get some crisps.

HE: I thought you weren't hungry.

PART NINE—MONKEY CHATTER

HE and SHE in bed. Text overlapping on soundscape. Actors behind the screens, backlit, so they appear as shadows.

HE: What are you doing way over there? I want to touch you. What's wrong with her? Is she going to sulk about this? Oh no. My dick is stirring. It's getting tight. Not now. My balls feel like concrete.

Let me hold you. No funny business, let's just cuddle. I can smell her. I can smell her sex. Down, boy.

She's awake.

If only you could take me as I am.

SHE: He's stirring. He wants sex. He can forget it. I'm not opening my legs to a closed book. Sigh like you're sleeping.

If he's not letting me in, I'm not letting him in. He ain't going up my Valerie. Don't be selfish. Touch him. He's a big puppy wanting stroking.

He knows I'm awake.

If only you could be what I wanted. He's so annoying. Why am I with someone who is annoying? The

She's got nipples like bubble gum.
Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop...

I wonder if I can have a wank without her hearing.

That's an interesting shape in the wallpaper. Hadn't noticed that before...

Seven Dwarfs, I'm Grumpy and you're Horny. I'm Snow White too. Someday my Prince will come. Sneaking suspicion he's not the one. Don't think that, don't think that...

Come over here, touch me, be rough, entertain me with your fingers. Can I, do I? Do I want it? How do I want it? I won't. I could. I should. I must. I will. I can't I won't I will.

For fuck sake, get out of your head and into the bed.

What am I doing here? My life used to be fun.

PART TEN—HIS PARANOIA

HE: Suspicion winks and nudges with its collar turned up. It ransacks my private property. It hints at a five-minute lateness of an errand that is too long gone. Twenty minutes for a carton of cream? Suspicion. It reads between the lines and checks the answering machine before she gets home. It draws up lists, it makes conjectures. The run on the left leg that miraculously moved to the right. I mean, what happened? Did she fall over and her legs got tangled up?

I work a long day, I come home and decide to curl up for a catnap. What's that smell? Hey, Goldilocks, has somebody been sleeping in my bed? The house creaks and groans. I listen for the clock's tick and chime. As if somewhere in its nocturnal silent shift, it will tell the truth. It will whisper his name to me. It will tell me what's going on. It will be loyal to its master. It will find its voice and tell me the truth.

Till then, what do you do? You close your eyes and sleepwalk through the week. You paint your grin an inch thick and hope it suffices. Hope that it will go away, that the itch will just stop and she will not think of him anymore or see him or touch him, or kiss him, or fuck him anymore and the other us will dry up and blow away.

SHE: When we first met he was the man of my dreams, it was happily ever after but tonight, I found myself brushing away the kisses of

another man. Hoping that in the feeble light, another man's fingerprints didn't show, another man's whisper couldn't be heard in the drum of my ear or another man's caress felt across my skin. We lay back to back and I hoped that a night's sleep would cure an act of infidelity. For a while, I cordoned myself off from him like the scene of a crime. I surrounded myself with a chalk outline. But wouldn't you know it—my man's a Private Dick. He goes over police barriers. He examines the bodies himself. He looks to the camera and says "Something isn't the same again."

PART ELEVEN—SOMETHING UNSPOKEN

The text in bold is on soundscape with underscoring. It is accompanied by a dance section that reveals the violent subtext of their silence.

Something unspoken got into bed with us last night. It slithered between the sheets and lay in the gap between a man and a woman. It curled up in that tiny chink in our relationship. The space that is normally reserved for—"listen to me."

Something unspoken drew battle lines across the breakfast table this morning. It barb wired across the tea and toast. He and I fox-holed ourselves behind the morning post. As he left I fired a silent blank across the bow of his "see you tonight." His answering shot was a slammed front door. "Fuck him," that's what I say. He'll be back on a bended knee.

SHE: What's wrong?

HE: Nothing.

SHE: Something's wrong.

HE: We don't laugh together any more.

We don't bathe together any more.

We don't get dirty with each other any more.

We don't eat together.

We don't cook together.

SHE: What?

HE: You're fucking another man!

SHE: I am not!

HE: You're beautiful when you lie.

SHE: Fuck you very much.

Something unspoken eclipsed the sun this evening. It burnt out the bright spot we'd both basked in. So now we sit in the dark, watching TV, holding our breath. It's a winter sun out there but it's nine below in here.

HE: C'mon Goldilocks, who's been sleeping in my bed?

SHE: Oh, Jim, Mike, Simon, David and Roger. But they're not in your bed. They're here (*points to her head*). In my bottom drawer. After you've come and gone, I go in the bathroom and wank. And I fantasize about other men.

HE: What?

SHE: I want more than this. This is not enough.

HE: What do you want me to do?

SHE: There are things missing from this relationship...

HE: Like Roger the Bartender.

SHE: Oh, please.

HE: Has he got a foot-long hot dog?

SHE: Get a life!

HE: I'm trying to make you happy.

Something unspoken came to stay for the weekend. It didn't content itself with the spare room. It flopped itself on the sofa. It snored itself through Saturday night and Sunday lunch.

HE: I'm trying to make you happy.

SHE: Well, stop it! Stop trying to make me happy! If I could just get in with a scouring pad and clean out your skull—all those stuck and studied parts! How dare you give me a guilt trip! I'm sure you've wanted to fuck somebody at the office, or that cute waitress at Bar Rumba?

HE: Is that what I should do? And who should I fuck first? Your sister? Your mother? You tell me what to do. You always *do* tell me what to do. Anything you say. (*In an Indian accent*) Yes, Queenie, I will cook chapati, Yes, Queenie, As you wish. You've got India, anything else?

SHE: Don't be ridiculous!

HE: You've got India, go fuck Africa next, fuck the Middle East, go forth and conquer until you RULE the FUCKING WORLD!

SHE: You only think I'm the Queen because you are so sure you are a slave!

Something unspoken came on like a fucking car crash. It threw our dinner guests over the bonnet and left them sprawled across the dining room table bleeding embarrassment.

Something unspoken was all we had to say to each other. How quickly we forget. It doesn't take long before animal attraction becomes survival of the fittest.

SHE: You only think I'm the Queen because you are so sure you are a slave!

HE: Yeah? Well, sometimes slaves escape.

PART TWELVE—HE GOES and SHE DISCOVERS

HE: So, I hit the bricks. I gathered up my cross and nails and martyred myself into this seedy hotel. I crucified myself on the single bed and told the leaky tap to heal itself...So, I am lying in bed and I can't sleep. I'm wriggling and jiggling like I'm on a hotplate. There's loud music coming from next door so I pull the pillow over my ears but it's no good. One half of me is organizing the autopsy of our relationship whilst the other half is having its arse kicked by Culture Club. So I go and knock on the door where it is coming from. There is no answer because the music is so loud. So I open the door and there's this woman sitting there on the bed in her nightdress plucking her eyebrows. I try to say please could you turn the music down. She can't hear me. I pull the plug. She hits me with a can of hair spray. I get this odd feeling. I end up going back to my room and lying in the bed thinking, "I wonder what she is doing now?"

SHE: So I find myself at dinner, across the table from Roger.

"I'm a listener,
I actually like to do the washing up,
I quit smoking,
I start up,
I quit, I start,
I fast, I feast,
I most, I least.
I pack it in and go down to the pub.
I pee in public pools,
I never initiate a breakup."

HE: She let the cat out of the bag and it's climbing the fucking walls. Where do I go from here? Will she take a tiger when I promised her a pussycat? If I let all of these animals out of their cages...Isn't that dangerous? Isn't that what zoos are for? All the lions and tigers and bears, oh my.

SHE: "I like it when it's intense."

And the waiter is there with his "What do you want to drink? Red or white? To eat, this or that?"

"Intense isn't quite the right word. I like it when it suits me. Not suits. Satiates. When I get what I want. Does that sound terrible? But I want it. Is that selfish? Yeah?"

I'm not a listener, actually, and I am selfish, and I won't change, and I am a queen, so fuck you I am, and I'll not step down. Not for anyone.

And the waiter's there. "And for dessert? What do you want?"

HE: I've got the tiger by his toe. If he hollers let him go...eeny, meeny, miney, moe.

On soundscape, underscored with music.

HE: Something unspoken cleared its throat.

SHE: Something broke. It snapped through spaghetti straps and put my ballgown through a meltdown.

HE: It tore through pretense...

SHE: ...cracked the crown of my head...

HE: ...shed collars and cuffs down to...

SHE: ...stripping thick skin, it left me...

HE: ...it left me naked.

SHE: ...it left me naked.

Soundscape ends. Back in the restaurant with Roger.

SHE: I spoke, "I have to go."

Music and movement section to exorcise the demons.

EPILOGUE—VOWS

HE: I'm not going to beg you to love me.

SHE: I do. You don't have to beg.

HE: I do. You always have to be on top.

SHE: I do. You roll over and let me.

HE: I do. You know there is a sleeping beast in me.

SHE: I do. You snore like a lion.

HE: I do. You act like a cow.

SHE: I do. Please forgive me.

HE: I do. You never do the dishes.

SHE: I do. You never put the toilet seat down.

HE: I do. You only start getting dressed when the taxi is waiting outside.

SHE: I do. I always pay for the taxi.

HE: I do. You know I am the better cook.

SHE: I do. You know I am the better cook.

HE: I do. You melt me like a drink on a stick.

SHE: I do. You turn my heart to cream cheese.

HE: I do. You don't have to clear out that bottom drawer.

SHE: I do. You don't have to tell me about your father.

HE: I do.

Holly Day

Where the Trembling Comes In

I've taken to sleeping naked at night
sprawled out on the floor for invisible cameramen
eyes rolled back, all the way back in my head
imagining the feel of rough police hands
as they trace me in chalk, another
tragic casualty and I've

taken to writing suicide notes
practising my handwriting, where the trembling comes in,
who to single out for love and for blame
and who to leave out, blatantly

and I've taken to stealing strange men's clothes
snuck out of the wash at the public laundry
to scatter about and around my bedroom
like a parade of cruel lovers, all of them

just passing through.

The versions of Èsù [Èsù-Elégbára, Legba, Exú, Echu-Elegua, Papa Legba, Papa La Bas] are all messengers of the gods: he interprets the will of the gods to human beings; he carries the desires of human beings to the gods. He is known as the divine linguist, the keeper of àse (logos) with which Olódumarè created the universe...Èsù is guardian of the crossroads, master of style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane world...In Yoruba mythology, Èsù always limps, because his legs are of different lengths: one is anchored in the realm of the gods, the other rests in the human world...Above all else, Èsù is the Black Interpreter, the Yoruba god of indeterminacy, the sheer plurality of meaning, or àriyèmuyè ('that which no sooner is held than slips through one's fingers').

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey"

Rum Broadcast

conductor conductor,
testing testing.
I sure
footedly halfstep
to drum splayed for you. does rum

conduct electricity? drop a dram
on the ground to be grounded,
to be landed,
so we can dig the sound
of the switches and the channels.
Shango flows into the amp,
the tubes warm up,
the filaments erupt.

go fourth and multiply
go north and fly
to each cardinal point,
winged curse or course,
and us the forth
generation from slavery.

conductor, conductor,
ten-four, that's a copy.
multiples of multitudes
on the move
conductive to
a 't'
't' for two
worlds. swallow these spirits I stoke for you,
this mess of embers I am left with.

dancing from one drink to the next.
my god
what have we come to?
my loa
raises a cup of flames to the chaos.
my trick stirrer
trips on slurs and stut

ters, 'my name
is Legba
and I am
an alcoholic.'
a swig here
 there a sip
and I pick up
your feed.

transmission
live on location,
I vocalize how dry I've been. I preen
in my top hat, walking stick,
and afro sheen. live and direct
i push up the levels
on this worn mixing board. treble
and strife. bass
and superstructure. material
and spirit worlds
dig it—

*no rain
gonna wash away
the tracks we layin
down
tonight.*

Sam

Baron Samedi slaps down
the cover—six dollars—and, shedding
his skin, flicks
one more to the coat check girl,
sails on in

straight for the gin, parched
as the tender serves with his left hand
sloe on the rocks with a tonic Charybdis
and a quicklime twist. the spook
of the eternal blues mouths 'down the hatch'
through a lipless grin

and steps to the floor.
ghost feet don't glide but skank
like chains or canes
on planks. hearing through the holes
in his head, silent Sam's bones
clatter and sync
opate to the reverb and wine, the grind
of a deck's worth of losing hands. Sam

struts among youth vampirical,
so cool, cooler than miracles.
walkin on ice. he
laughs in his top hat at sacrilege, he
scoffs at reluctance to avarice, he
howls, he
counts, he
boogies
down
down in his dusty tux, tails
and browless frown.
the right Baron Samedi,

perpetually in his home town
amongst those with eyes closed in dance
as the strobes knock knock on their lids
like ice picks. Sam has a way
of prying his way in. his clearance
is majestic, noble his appearance. regal
is his wriggle, his shimmy
and his shackle, his cough
and his sputter, his hack
and your circumstance. dancing,

eyes shut tight, flipping
coins into the cup
of trembling, guessing
on heads or tails or t
cells. taking a path
this way or that, vein
or artery, fading
flush of spades
or dead man's hand. Sam

taps, drums, rolls
his bone digits a
cross shoulders to go
as in a child's game
of seven up: heads down,
eyes closed,
dancing slow
so cold, so close
barren Sam
laughs your luck
as Samedi
this time
simply
passes
fastly.

Yannis Goumas

Twentieth of October

It was in Proxénou Koromilá Street,
In whose evening stillness
A church bell now bonged.

I was walking on the pensive side of walking

When a turf-haired guy
Came from the opposite pavement
And asked me for a light.

It happened to be my birthday,
Undivulged by me and forgotten by all.

I guess he was by way of a candle.

Pamela Woodside

Ginger

(Zingiber officinale)

Ginger grows roots like hands
leathered skin
fat sectioned fingers.
I wield a sharp knife
and slice three times
exposing pale pulp.
The fresh smell
in the other hours so sweet
sickens me now.
I drop the ginger coins in cold water
drink
wait for it to smooth the afternoon.

I remember a time
slicing ginger into my bath
immersing
in clear water
emerging
with skin fresh on fire.
And he is in bed
waiting
scent of arousal.

Two moons passed me by.
Seven more will swell
and disappear
and all I can do is wait
envisioning clean eyes
iris skin
small hands to grow and handle
hoe
needle
bucket
herbs.

The Dead Are Drinking at My Door

quiet & respectful, without knocking, without
fuss, without stumbling through the walls.
They wait outside the washroom like gentleman drinkers,
standing in the hall under their curling, yellowed photos,
bridging gaps between us with phantom pub songs,
pint glasses, an ethereal brew that pours & swallows smooth.

My mother's father, Tank-Sergeant James, is dressed in uniform,
buzzcut head, half-lidded eyes, maple leaf on his shoulder;
a thick cigarette dangles from the side of his mouth.
He holds a rifle under his arm, a bottle in each fist, looking at me
like he needs a light. A bullet hole in his leg is wrapped
in bandage—oozing. "I bled for thirty years," he says, lifts a bottle
to his lips & fades, becoming the grey tones of a colourless photo.

My other grandfather, Victor, is dressed for the Orange parade,
his July Twelfth best—stained, creased flat, his face
a stumbling kilter of pride, of wailing song. My father never
knew the man, he died when dad was only a child. I look at him
standing there swaying & think of what a long line of drunks
I have to live up to. He reaches in his jacket for a flask, pours me
another. He smiles, revelling in the final hours of his march.

My dad, 19, on the deck of a ship, grease between his fingers,
dirt under his thick nails. Someone behind has called him &
he's half turned to go, but stopped as if looking back at me.
"Son," he says & I can hear his Belfast for the first time,
"Got to go, the police expect me to be in by 11." I laugh
as he slowly begins to pixelate, freezing into the father I know
from pictures, becoming the myth that became the man.

They've each come to see me off, have a few pints,
get their pictures taken with the next in line & have a final
toast, one to me now that I am old enough to stand their chill.
They've each come to see me go, filter themselves
one by one through my liver & kidneys, slide from me,
steaming onto the ground. Smiling, I move to close the door.

I look at my glass, slowly swirl the throwaway sip of beer.
"But Dad," I call before he is completely fixed & he stops
with his back to me. "You're not dead yet." His shoulders slide
low—he looks over at me. "Check your head, son, I'm not his
ghost," he says, cocking a thumb at his wrinkled photograph,
"I'm yours." I remove the chain & push open the wood.

The dead are drinking down my door. The 3 a.m. banging,
the footsteps, the flushes, the broken mirror where I stood
looking at myself for an hour, pointing & laughing out loud.

A Rustle in the Bush

stops us cold, your raised hand
a hole in the stars, signing our conversation
to a stammer of crickets.
There is a sound of movement
from the still woods behind the garden.

At night the flowers lose their colour
taking the shape of hunched strangers in the
grey tangle of the deep green bed,
heads dipped low toward the sheets,
leaf arms loose until morning.

In the taller grass near the edge of the pond,
a cat crouches, betrayed by its domesticity
and eyes; the reeds swaying around it
are quiet as witnesses.

I'm trying to tell you about my eye,
how when the light dims suddenly
one iris can't keep up with the other,
staying contracted, pinholed, expanding slower.
I'm saying I go blind on one side
every time you block the light
by leaning in to kiss.

You laugh, tending the peonies,
their massive heads lolling drunkenly,
reintroducing yourself in the dark,
shaking petals hello, letting ants crawl
onto your hand and in between your fingers.
The honeydew you rubbed on your
nails attracts them, you say.

When I'm drunk, I explain,
everything seems occasional, the world
seasonally fragile, more momentary than
your peonies, more fleeting than your ants.
When I'm drunk my eyes focus
with the speed and accuracy of a cat.
It is a survival mechanism.

Rustles in the bush interrupt us again.
The cat raises its hackles, slits its eyes,
the ants *drip from your fingers* and
your hand moves up to cut holes in the night.
My eye slowly widens in the dark.
It's the movement of the ants,
you whisper, that separates the petals.

It is the sound of something leaving
which stops me from replying,
or the heavy stumble of someone
coming home.

Wang Yin

translated from the Chinese by Michael Day

four poems

Robert Capa*

A battlefield photojournalist says to me
rain's stopped
Really, we came out of the restaurant on the corner
and the rain stopped
there was only wind

But on the Mekong delta it rained all the time
three weeks later he died there
died in the black rainy season
On his face there was never a scar
none
Finally when he fell under a banana tree
also none
His left hand gracefully clutching a camera as if
holding his own right hand
softly a dark green leaf
flashes on black leather boots a black jacket

When he and I came out of the restaurant
after the rain in the sky
there was a dark brown spot
like a button on Capa's jacket
but neither of us said a thing

*1913 - 1954, LIFE *photojournalist*

Important Matters

Important matters always start from the left
a hand of folded paper
has always cherished a great ambition
to write a book on a bed sheet
the other hand holds an Adam's apple of folded paper
without any expression
a satisfying work
poured into boiling coffee

Following this path too many become people
too many grow into birds and hurt feelings
the shadow under the stairs is always somewhat longer than summer
the dance arrayed beside this is a light colour
the courtyard is first class too

Fallen trees lying east to west
steadily open the only body they have

Walt Whitman

He is now in my front yard chopping firewood
He should make sound
like sunlight that way
I have to squint to see him
He should make sound
not obscurely chew a leaf of tobacco
also not a butterfly
seasoning soup or a plate
falling under an oak in Louisiana
He should make sound
chopping firewood is best
stand in my front yard chopping wood ding-ding dang-dang
like sunlight that way
pure and proud
We all squint to see him

A Night in Conversation with the Poet Bly

In the night's light grass is very deep
for a long time no human trace
for a long time I never thought of you
your isolated chin twinkles
like that red star in the sky

Besides the night I must also silently sit in the deep grass
intertwine my fingers
so as to forget the approach of dawn
to forget I have parted from books for many years

A white horse gallops head-on at me, a white butterfly
tramples over insect sounds firefly light

Han Dong

translated from the Chinese by Michael Day

Learning to Write With a Brush

Father and some visitors are speaking, no place to sit, beds and chairs have all been packed up. Trussed-up items of furniture all around. Straw rope, rush bags, cardboard all over the floor—the furniture is packed into these things. Mother comes in from making tea, can't find a place to put down the cups. She looks left and right, still can't find a suitable spot.

The furniture is not in its original place; it has all been put back-to-back in the middle of the room. The parts of the walls which had been covered up by the furniture are now bare, very very white, very very new. Maternal grandfather has dumped out the garbage and is wringing out a mop. Xiao-bo watches as bit by bit a dark red becomes visible. Maternal grandfather backs up as he mops the floor. Mother, father and the guests all have to go outside.

"We're moving this afternoon, why are you still mopping up?" mother says.

It's Xiao-bo's impression that mother's dresser is the most important item: at least two quilts are used to pad the mirror above it. Four people and eight hands lift it. Above, in back of the truck, four people take hold of it (father is among them). Mother says: "Careful, careful." They're all saying "Careful, careful."

I'm Xiao-bo, already eight years old. I'm attending second grade in primary school now. In my first year I was the Little Red Guard squad leader. My elder brother is in high school, but he isn't a Red Guard. Daddy says his political consciousness is not as high as mine. But daddy also says his own is higher; because daddy's an adult, work on elder brother's consciousness should be done by him. But it is still me who discovers the problem. When daddy and elder brother are playing chess, daddy criticizes him for sitting on the glass table top; the pressure will break it. Daddy doesn't hear him say, Even if I crush a bust of Chairman Mao it doesn't matter, just as long as it isn't deliberate. I hear him and immediately want to report it to my teacher. My elder brother said something reactionary, my elder brother says reactionary things. Our family has a counter-revolutionary, too. Daddy slaps elder brother across the face and

says to me that our teacher's consciousness is not as high as daddy's either; my elder brother ought to be properly educated by daddy.

It is arranged for the whole family to live in a military guest house. The men and the women are segregated. And so, father, maternal grandfather, and elder brother have to go to another place. Xiao-bo is together with his mummy and her mother in one big room with the women and young children of several families.

Dinner is like a family reunion: in the cafeteria over a hundred halved-families are calling to each other, searching for each other before finally sitting down together and starting to eat—only to find that there is also another family at the table. Half an hour later the males of the two families at our table leave for their lodgings. The women and children of the two families also gather together in one place; they haven't finished speaking yet. The children's games have only just begun.

A horde of children goes to see the vehicles they'll be riding in tomorrow. Identical, brand-new buses lined up in rows in the empty space in front of the building. The big red paper flowers attached to the front of the buses are also identical. Small, coloured triangular flags are on the bus roofs, no more and no less than sixty of them. The doors and windows on the buses are all closed tight. The children make a human ladder to get up for a look-see. The buses are all the same inside: the high back-rests wait for them to come take a seat—but who knows which bus they'll be sitting in tomorrow? If you were Xiao-bo, wouldn't you want to find the bus you'd be in?

My elder brother hasn't a high political consciousness, but isn't a counter-revolutionary either, daddy tells me. Daddy says he has been influenced by others, he isn't bad by nature. Later, when other children come to play with my elder brother, I listen closely, listen to what they say: do others influence elder brother or does my elder brother influence others?

The phosphorescent light is white, the walls and blankets also white. The phosphorescent light reflects off everyone's faces, and it makes them look even flatter. The bump on the bridge of maternal grandmother's nose seems to have been shrunk, too. There's no other furniture aside from the beds in the room. Packages which people have brought with them are stuffed under the beds. Each family is drying the ubiquitous washcloths on a line that can't be seen now. But all colours of cloth are being dried, making the line obvious. There are only two night tables, the surfaces of which are covered by all types of medicine jars, cups, soap boxes, hairpins, glasses, flashlights, books, tissue paper, and snack food spreading out onto the beds of each family. Women! Xiao-bo has

never seen them this close up before. He has never seen such an old lady, older than his maternal grandmother. She's sitting on a bed and a woman is washing her feet. To get the old lady's feet into the water, the woman has to hold the ceramic basin up with both hands. Although father and his maternal grandfather aren't there, Xiao-bo still feels there are lots of heads of families about him. His elder brother isn't around, but Xiao-bo has lots of brothers and sisters. Years later Xiao-bo will read in a book: Human society is developed from matriarchal clans. That night in the guest-house—he can't help but think back to it—children all around their mothers and mothers with their children around their maternal grandmothers, raising a great ruckus.

Elder brother makes me play a chess match with Da-tou. I beat Da-tou. Da-tou is five years older than me, the same age as my elder brother. He wants me not to tell anyone what he said. I'd already forgotten about it. I ask him what it is that he doesn't want me to tell others. He repeats the reactionary thing he said earlier. I ask him who he doesn't want me to tell. He says the Red Guard company commander, Liu Li-xin. Now I recall the reactionary thing he said, and I also know who to report it to. What was the reactionary thing I said, Da-tou asks me. I say you said that, actually, China's navy is not as good as the American navy. Da-tou says, now you've said something reactionary, too. I say I was only saying what he had said. Da-tou says repeating reactionary talk is counter-revolutionary, too; you and I won't report it to anybody. I agree. Later he plays chess with me again, beating me twice. Da-tou says, I lost the first game to you deliberately so you wouldn't tell others about the reactionary thing I said. He says he beat me twice, I beat him once; he wins two-to-one. I recall him saying reactionary things twice, I only said it once. So I tell Da-tou I can report it to Liu Li-xin.

They're out of bed before the sun comes up. Mother helps Xiao-bo put on his clothes, they all go out into the courtyard to wash on either side of the open-air cistern. Above the surrounding walls there is only one solitary star looking like the tip of a needle.

Father, maternal grandfather and elder brother are already waiting by the bus door. The second time he awakes, the sun is already up in the sky and the bus is passing through the city. The route they're travelling has been prearranged, the crowds seeing them off line both sides of the street. The passengers roll down all the windows, parts of bodies are being squeezed out, hands are waving non-stop. Someone is crying. Xiao-bo hears the sobbing, but can't locate the crying face because everyone is looking out the windows with their backs to him.

All morning the buses and trucks pass through the city. Xiao-bo waves

the whole time. Mother has an arm around his waist; she is also waving. Sometimes she takes Xiao-bo's hand in hers and they wave together. But all the people below in the street who call out quickly turn their attention quickly to other buses. Xiao-bo looks back lingeringly until he can't see them anymore. The crowd is shouting, waving, dancing, but it's not for them, not for Xiao-bo. Xiao-bo can't make out their glances. And his hands hurt, best to let mummy hold them, one hand or both. Mother knows who they are waving at.

On the run-up ramp to the Great Yang-tse River Bridge, the send-off reaches its climax. More cymbals and drums, more firecrackers, flags, and banners. The ranks along the road are also more regimented. Mother tells Xiao-bo, "This is to send us on our way, to see you off, to see each of us off"—only half the answer.

Da-tou gives me a popsicle to eat, I don't want it. Later I give it to elder brother. The popsicle I eat I take out of my elder brother's hand, it isn't the one Da-tou tried to give me. All in all Da-tou gave elder brother two popsicles. Da-tou says I ate his popsicle, I say I didn't. He says he bought two and he ate none; my elder brother ate one, Xiao-bo ate one. I say the popsicle I ate was handed to me by my elder brother. Da-tou says he asked elder brother to pass it to me. He says today's movie tickets were also bought by him: a war film, *Breakthrough at Wu River*; he's already seen it three times. Da-tou asks me if I've seen it. I say I haven't. Da-tou asks me if I would like to see it. I say I would, but not *his* movie. Da-tou says he isn't acting in it. Besides, my elder brother says, You've eaten his popsicle. Not going to see the movie's no good. I ask elder brother, If I watch the movie, will I not be able to report to Liu Li-xin the reactionary thing Da-tou said? My elder brother says, Naturally; he also says that even if I don't see the movie, I can't report what Da-tou said to Liu Li-xin: You've already eaten his popsicle.

Once the bus has crossed over the bridge, it begins to pick up speed. The distance between each vehicle in the column increases, too. The back of the bus ahead of Xiao-bo's has already shrunk; in between the buses the road and fields can be seen on both sides.

Xiao-bo is trying to make sense of those things that go with the fields: water buffalo, cattle, wheat, haystacks, mills. Mother's teaching him. But her knowledge of the countryside is limited; very quickly she is stumped. Xiao-bo moves over to father's side.

Since the road is raised up fairly high above the fields, from inside the bus it looks like the open country on both sides is below it. The scenery also becomes smaller than it actually is. The sky seems somewhat higher. After establishing this field of vision, when Xiao-bo looks at the people in

the bus again, he feels that something has changed. By the time he is seeing father, mother, his maternal grandfather and grandmother and his elder brother as he had seen them before, then looks out the window again, the countryside once more is very novel. He looks back and forth in this way often, until both in and out begin to appear in the same visual frame at once.

When daddy goes down the stairs I yell, Overthrow daddy. Wei-dong says that I can't call him daddy. If I call him daddy, I haven't made a clean break with him. Wei-dong says I have to call daddy by his name. My daddy is called Li Jian-ning. When Li Jian-ning reaches the second floor I shout: Overthrow Li Jian-ning. The hand daddy is sliding down the banister doesn't stop. Wei-dong says that I didn't yell loud enough, daddy didn't hear. So I yell again, in a voice louder than the first time and the second put together. Daddy's already reached the first floor; I see his hat and shoulders. Daddy doesn't stop, he walks out. Wei-dong says, Your daddy's too stubborn. We should write Overthrow Li Jian-ning on the wall for him to see.

The bus door opens: Xiao-bo can get in and out as he likes. He dares not go too far away from their bus. At least fourteen buses like this one are stopped on the road; Xiao-bo can't distinguish between them. Up and down the column, people are climbing out of the buses; once on the road some people jump the ditch and wander into the wheat fields. An elderly lady—older than his maternal grandmother—appears and is carried on someone's back toward the ditch. Her white hair can be seen from far away. Later the old lady is carried out from behind a haystack and two people go over the ditch to fetch her back. Xiao-bo asks mother: Where are they going? Mother says: To the toilet. Xiao-bo asks: Where's the toilet? Why can't I see it? Mother says: Behind the haystack. Following the old lady, one after another the others go there, fording the ditch and going in behind the pile of hay. Xiao-bo sees the others start to loosen their pants halfway there, then walk the rest of the way holding them up with their hands. All the people have come out from behind the haystack. Now others are walking toward it, they don't bother to undo their trousers. When the women went, the men all waited, watching the haystack as if entranced, chewing on food, drinking water or smoking. Mother and his maternal grandmother have gone; now it's his father's, his maternal grandfather's, and elder brother's turn. Xiao-bo wants to go, too; he wants to see the toilet behind the haystack. Suddenly the sun comes out, turning the other side of the haystack to gold. There isn't any sort of a toilet, no enclosing walls, no doors, windows, seats or squatting pits. A patch of earth is soaked; urine has collected in depressions in the ground.

All around are sheets of used paper, several pieces of which are sent scattering over the wheat field by the wind.

Mummy has yet to return from work and people from her work unit have come. These people stick a poster up on the door to mummy and daddy's room. I recognize mummy's name, "Lu Hong-ying," and "Overthrow." Now I know mother has been overthrown, too. Grandpa escorts mummy's workmates to the stairwell and says to them, Goodbye, come again. He gets a wash basin of water and scrubs the door clean of the glue around the poster. Grandpa then gets a bottle of glue and glues down the parts of the poster which are curling up. Grandpa uses the brush for cleaning the bed to flatten down the poster. The poster on our door is prettier than the posters on other people's doors. Later, after the poster has aged, grandpa makes me stand on a stool and retouch each character with a writing brush. Grandpa says this is called learning to write with a brush.

There are three good and three bad eggs in our family. Daddy, mummy and elder brother are the bad eggs. Grandpa, grandma and I are good—there are the same number of good as bad in our family. Later my grandpa will become a counter-revolutionary too, of the historical kind, and there will be more bad eggs than good in the family. Grandma and I are good eggs, grandpa and elder brother are bad. Daddy and mummy are also bad eggs. Daddy says my elder brother's consciousness is not high; he's not a bad person; he's just different from daddy. Since my elder brother is a good person with low consciousness, he can be considered a half a good egg at least. Elder brother is half good egg, half bad; sometimes good, sometimes bad. My grandma says, I don't want to be a good egg, I'll give it to your elder brother. My grandma says, I'm the same as your grandpa, a bad egg. She wants to be a bad egg, wants to be a landlord's wife. Now I'm the only good egg in the family. Grandma's good egg can't be passed on to elder brother. Give it to elder brother and he becomes one-and-a-half good eggs. How can the consciousness of one and a half good eggs be lower than mine? I'm a real good egg.

Water everywhere, yellowish-black water on both sides of the bus. It seems like their bus is travelling on water. Xiao-bo can't see the wheels, can't see the road beneath the wheels. He only sees water. The tableau from the bus window is even more boring, from top to bottom it can be divided into three parts: the sky, the fields, and the water. The water is closest to them; one can't see the river bank on this side.

Three buses leave the column of vehicles, driving toward some specific destination. Xiao-bo's bus is the second bus. Behind the third bus are trucks, eight or nine of which have left the column. The road surface

changes from asphalt to gravel. Just before dark another split in the ranks occurs: Xiao-bo's bus drives off onto a side road followed by the three trucks carrying all the belongings of the families in the bus ahead. The road surface changes from gravel to yellow dirt.

It is a very bumpy ride. With each bounce it seems the bus will topple over into the water. At times Xiao-bo watches the water through the left side windows, at times through the right. His maternal grandmother is constantly repeating: "What good can come of this!" His maternal grandfather's transistor radio plays through it all; it hasn't been turned off since Nanjing, and now it picks up a local station. Because of the bus's changes of direction, the reception alternates between good and bad.

The inside of the bus is now entirely dark. Of the three parts in the window's tableau, the sky is brightest. The fields in the middle are black and heavy. The brightness of the water's surface falls between the two—more yellowish-black oozes into the bus.

Mummy and daddy have gone to the May Seventh School for Cadres; usually they don't come home at night. Once more our family has just as many good eggs as bad eggs. My grandma is a nonsubscribing good egg, but she can't be a volunteer bad egg. Being a good egg is not voluntary. My elder brother is half a good egg. Only grandpa is a real bad egg, a historical counter-revolutionary.

The bus stops. Father leaves them and gets off the bus; when he boards it again two people with long, thick overcoats draped over their shoulders are with him. "We've arrived," father says and introduces the newcomers to everyone: they are cadres of the production brigade in which they are going to live—the brigade chief and the platoon leader of the people's militia.

The whole family gets up and prepares to leave the bus. On the one hand they have to greet representatives from the rural population—the brigade chief, the platoon leader—and, on the other hand, they also want to say good-bye to the families who have yet to arrive at their destinations. They must also thank the driver. Picking up their things, attending to the young and the old, the whole family finally gets out of the bus to discover that maternal grandfather has already disappeared.

Grandpa has to go to the residence committee every few days to give an account of his political shortcomings. When he comes back he says, Goddammit, goddammit, and also throws things. Grandpa stamps his foot and sighs. Later he sits at the table and reads the paper. I pay attention to everything that grandpa does; this is the task Auntie Wu gave me. She says grandpa probably has secret records of the former lands and

the debts owed him and is awaiting the day he can get back his own. She asks if there are any jars in the house, round black jars. I find one and give it to her. It's a pickling jar, says Auntie Wu. It looks something like a pickling jar, but it's not a pickling jar, grandpa will use it to keep his old property records, or a Mauser pistol, or, otherwise, to store gold bars. I say, I don't know what a gold bar looks like. Auntie Wu wants me to bring her all the things I don't recognize.

Face plastered up against the window, Xiao-bo peers out at the black multitude of people. (Unless one's face is against the window once the lights in the bus are turned on, one can't see.) While the crowd may be black, the earth is white.

He sees father walk into the crowd; his coat becomes the same white as the earth, his head and both legs stay black.

After father gets out of the bus, maternal grandfather also gets off. He goes over to the other side of the bus, into its shadow. Xiao-bo can't see him from where he's sitting. His maternal grandfather got out of the bus to relieve himself; he didn't know that the moonlight would be that bright.

Xiao-bo walks out of the area in which the vehicles are parked, comparing all the different shades of white as he goes. There is a particularly white strip running out far into the distance. Maternal grandfather thinks it's asphalt and walks along it. This is how he falls into the water.

The road's surface isn't flat, in the moonlight the contrasts between black and white stretches are enormous. When Xiao-bo gets out, he can't put his feet precisely on the white patches of roadway with each step. His maternal grandmother walks in front supported by two country girls. Very possibly her feet never touch the ground and she is carried ahead between them instead. Maternal grandfather's shoes are filled with water so he makes the most noise as we walk. He doesn't want anyone to help him along, he insists on walking on his own all the way.

On the other side of the bridge ahead lies the village where they are headed.

Someone at our school wrote a counter-revolutionary slogan: it was written in the dirt beside the exercise ground with a stick. Teacher Lin writes a paragraph on the blackboard and makes us copy it out. Teacher Lin says that she wants to compare handwriting. Teacher Lin says that this paragraph contains all the characters used in the counter-revolutionary slogan, but these are revolutionary, from a quotation of Chairman Mao's. Teacher Lin says, whoever wrote the counter-revolutionary poster had better own up to it now, and, most importantly, if the people behind the scenes who put that person up to it are turned in, that person will be freed. While she speaks, Teacher Lin is looking at me. Teacher Lin says,

even if you write with your left hand, we'll find you out. She makes us copy down the quotation from Chairman Mao with our right hands, and then again with our left hands. I didn't write the counter-revolutionary slogan, but I'm frightened. I'd learned to write the quote from Chairman Mao which Teacher Lin copied out long ago, therefore I certainly could have written all the counter-revolutionary slogan's characters, too. I could have written it, but I didn't write it. I want to tell Teacher Lin, My grandfather taught me how to write this Chairman Mao quotation, and he's an historical counter-revolutionary. Which characters from Chairman Mao's quotation were used to write the counter-revolutionary slogan in the dirt beside the playground? I think about it for a while before I figure it out. I think up five counter-revolutionary slogans, and I am even more frightened. I don't know which of the five is the one in the dirt next to the playground. I want to ask Teacher Lin, but I don't dare.

About two feet wide, the bridge has no railing; it is strung from the trunks of three or four trees, and below, of course, is a river. They have been walking alongside this river for a while. Now they want to cross it because they can't just keep walking along the embankment of the river forever.

All this is explained to maternal grandmother, but she doesn't listen; no matter what's said she won't move.

Now there are two more girls. Four girls attempt to get maternal grandmother across the bridge: her face is covered by a kerchief, she says she can't breathe, just as she begins to fear that she will die from suffocation, they get her across. Before she has time to even think about falling into the river and drowning, she is on the other side. The family stands on this side and sees that maternal grandmother is on the far side. Xiao-bo and his elder brother shout—Grandma; their maternal grandmother answers them and wants to cross over again because her whole family is on this side. This time she's not at all afraid, she walks up onto the bridge by herself. The four country girls rush to grab hold of her.

Mummy complains that grandpa glued the poster down too well, now it'll take a lot of effort to remove it. Grandpa says, Let me do it. They're fighting over who will scrub the door. Mummy makes me bring soap and laundry detergent, also spot remover and rice water. She has grandpa heat the water on the stove. Mummy stands on a stool and refuses to come down; she makes me bring her a broom, a rag, a brush, a feather duster and a fruit knife. I watch her scrape off the dry glue bit by bit. Mummy says that she was liberated today, that ripping down the poster was approved by the party organization.

The oil lamp illuminates a circle on the table. In the center of the circle

underneath the oil lamp is the shadow of the lamp itself. The shadow's movements follow the movements of the flame. Xiao-bo sees that the shadow at the center is small and black. But the shadows on the walls and the ceiling are big and blurry.

Four bowls are placed on the table. The oil lamp is raised up higher; the shadows of the four bowls sway.

Lots of people are in the room watching them eat.

Xiao-bo and mother sit on the edge of the bed; behind them is a high pile of quilts. From beneath the quilts a man speaks. He is speaking, so Xiao-bo knows that someone's lying down and those aren't just quilts there. The woman introduced as their host tells them that it is her husband. He's had a stomach illness for over twenty years and has been lying in bed all this time.

Xiao-bo is especially interested in getting a good look at the sick man's face, but the man keeps the quilts pulled up to his nose. His hair hangs down so long over his face that he looks like a woman. He crooks one of his legs under the quilts, which allows Xiao-bo to lean back more comfortably against him.

A big dog comes out from under the table; its head comes up as high as the table top, and under the light it is yellowish-brown in colour. It pushes at a plate of food with its mouth and all the people in the room shoo it away. The dog hesitates; it looks at Xiao-bo. Xiao-bo places his hand on the dog's head; he feels that its fur is a little damp, but very soft.

"And what's your name?" asks Xiao-bo. All the children in the room answer for it: "It's called Dog."

"And what do you eat?"

"It eats shit."

Once again people come from where mummy works. And, again, on the door to daddy and mummy's room they stick a poster. This time I know it is a good one. They shake hands with grandpa and grandma. They shake hands with me. They make the door that mummy had scrubbed clean dirty once more. At the door to our home they set off firecrackers, beat drums, and put on political skits. They get their dirty footprints over everything. After they leave, grandpa starts to mop the floor and scrub the door again. He teaches me to read the slogan on the poster on the door: Comrade Lu Hong-ying's entire family has been given the honour of receiving approval to be transferred to the countryside.

Something Xiao-bo ate has given him a stomach ache. The children lead him out to find the toilet. All the children come out with him. They surround Xiao-bo and reach out to touch his city clothing.

It's much brighter outside the house than in it. In the moonlight Xiao-

bo sees that the head of one child is extremely large. Xiao-bo calls him Da-tou (Big Head); this Da-tou's head is bigger than his elder brother's classmate Da-tou's. Beside the bamboo grove in back of the house is a vat buried up to its rim in corn stalks. Da-tou tells him that this is the toilet: Here's where you shit.

"Watch me," Da-tou says, and he squats in the bamboo grove. Xiao-bo hears him fart, he also sees a buttock illuminated by the moonlight. "Okay," Da-tou says. Dog, dog, dog, dog, he calls the dog and the yellow dog comes running. Slurp slurp slurp slurp. It really does eat shit. Da-tou raises his ass and lets the dog lick it clean. "Can you do it?" Da-tou asks Xiao-bo.

When Xiao-bo squats by the shit vat, all the other children lower their pants and squat. They shit together with him. Xiao-bo doesn't feel embarrassed anymore. His ass is cold; it hurts a bit because of the chill wind. Above the corn stalks the moon is big and round; Xiao-bo thinks it looks like a bright buttock.

In our courtyard I'm the only child being transferred to the countryside. There are a dozen or so in our school; there's nothing unusual about it. There are two in our class, I am one, and one is being sent forcibly. His family are bad elements; they haven't been rehabilitated. Teacher Lin asks, are there students who are being transferred to the countryside in our class? Raise your hands. I raise my hand; the student who is being forced to go raises his, but he's different from me. My mummy and daddy have been rehabilitated; their transfer is voluntary, a kind of honour. Later when the school has a send-off assembly, that student isn't up on stage. I sit on stage, and over a dozen other students sit with me, none of whom are in my class. We wear big red paper flowers and each of us is issued a set of the collected writings of Mao Ze-dong. The other students are all down below in front of the rostrum applauding. Teacher Lin is also sitting out front.

"This is Xiao-bo's new home," mother says. They walk through the village toward it. The building is at something of an angle; Xiao-bo thinks this is an illusion caused by the moonlight. The shadow cast behind the building is long and dark, like a great pit.

The people of the village had tried to build a brick stove. When an oil lamp is placed on the stove top, Xiao-bo sees several adobe bricks scattered about on the ground. Probably they hadn't had time to finish building it before their arrival. One can't see clearly inside the house; the brigade chief says there are three rooms in total.

They want to dry their maternal grandfather's wet pants on the stove. Wheat stalks are gathered together as kindling. Everybody sits on the

pile of wheat stalks and the fire is lit. As it burns, stalks are taken from underneath them and added to the flames. The brigade chief pokes at the fire with a branch. The fire burns very brightly. Xiao-bo has never seen flames this high. The bottoms of his maternal grandfather's cotton pants begin to steam, the interior of the room begins to brighten.

Father asks the brigade chief: "What was this building used for before?"

"Public building," the brigade chief says. "Raised cattle in here for awhile."

"How many cattle does the brigade chief have?" father asks.

"Six head." Exactly the number of people in Xiao-bo's family.

Now they can clearly see a myriad of cracks in the earth walls and a great many things hanging down from the roof.

"Ash hanging there," the brigade chief says. "In the winter, fires are set to keep the cattle warm, after a period of time the ash hangs down from the roof."

The suspended ash dangles down in coils, looking like the droopy, hairy tail of some animal. There's a heavy concentration above the flames on the ceiling of the room.

Maternal grandfather is constantly adding kindling to the fire. The flames rise higher and higher. Maternal grandmother says, "The old man's trying to kill us." No one pays any attention to her. Then she says, "What good can possibly come of this."

She says it over and over and over.

Ice

The puck is dropped. Naming begins: *this is a puck*.
Puh, she replies, *puh* she whispers. There are only so
many apologies, so many startings over

this is one, a baby at 13 months saying *puh*, holding the flat hard face
to her face, her breath sketching itself in the winter air against
the new moon in her mittened hand

after confession and prayer, the slate is wiped clean
for the truly repentant, this is how I understand it,
how it is mocked by the lie and faith
is reasoning in a circle

the puck participates in both the sphere and the cube,
I slide it down the grey sheet of ice like a curler
with first rock. On this ice I can teach something about force
and motion

puh, she says and points, *let's go get it*, I say. *Let's go!*
Every year the ice, new like the fresh page,
conception, birth, a life converted mid-
sentence; we say *has seen the light*

if the earth were just that bit further from the sun (say
if the planet were a human head, the length a hair grows
overnight) it would be winter everywhere,

and Christ in buried Jerusalem would have said
this is the water upon which I build my church.

Connection

wyo, she says, pointing again to the wire that hangs from the wall that once linked an intercom between this child's room and the bedroom of her parents. *Yes, it's a wire*, I say, pointing as well where the ear of the machine used to listen in the night, and she turns the sound over and over *wyo wyo wyo wayo whyo whyuh* mouthing its texture, its own demands to shape her lips and tongue, in the hearing its connection to me and the way we are joined by the motion of a directed hand. These are the narrowing days: she specifies, discards, retains, practices, she pans for words among sound: *whyo* she offers the way she reaches towards my mouth with a bite of whatever I have given her to eat, and we partake together what it is to provide; before dinner yesterday she rolled to the edge of the couch, struck her head on the corner of a laundry basket and we asked ourselves, as parents do over and over, how *could* we let that happen, but it ended with her in our arms in the way we have come to count on our ability to comfort her when really the fact of comfort is a wonder when you think back on it at all. Hours later, my father-in-law enters the room of events he did not see. She says *Pah-pah*, her name only for him. She points first to the couch, then to the basket (which we have removed) then in her eye the story.

Adam's River

*Walter Moberly reports that, when he visited the lake in 1865, he
"made acquaintance of Adam and Eve, an Indian and his wife."*

Akrigg, *British Columbia Place Names*

Downstream ever further from our native
nowheres (paradise, wilderness)
we ooh and aah harder over
these sockeye come three hundred miles upstream

enamoured of their exactitude of instinct
sniffing out birth-scrabbled gravel and graves
as if home were the whole story

and not how far we've signalled in the circuitry
at the higher brain, how deep in its ocean
dropping off the ledges of the sonar.

Through all the known and unknown world
in widening reflection float
our theorems, overtures, internets

in the spacy self-consciousness
between available flavours, tasty speciation.

Anyone's buffed-up antique couple (singular, original
pre-parental statuary, isolate and looming
within each life's parentheses)

rubs uneasy shoulders on this crowded little bridge
with massive, loafing miracle, the amazing many
roughening, reddening the water, push

come to shove of populations
pursued, pursuing increase.

Dead Man's Float

I'd no need to lie face down
in the water, arms outstretched
to stay afloat in Lake of the Woods.

Being a chubby kid I could sit
among the log-like ten year olds earnestly drifting

in the requisite six feet by the dock. I sat motionless,
knees pulled up, beach ball body tipped

back a little, head comfortably
pillowed on the surface. I could even pretend
(and did) to be smoking, right arm extended
to allow a quizzical, sophisticated gaze

at the mimed cigar. A couple of other campers
would spot me and shout to the counsellor, "Look!"
And he would. At that age in that place

it was my singular, unique ability.
I outgrew it, of course. Couldn't do it now

to save my life.

Micheal O'Siadhail

Scale

What's this new inwardness of our middle years
Poised between that hope and our remembrance?
For all the ambition, gnawings and strife of careers,
Beginnings of recollection, the backward glance?
For the young it isn't memory or the long recall:
Everything forwards, aims and plans and hope,
Our unbroken prime clambered an orchard wall
Fresh and hungry for the full venture and scope.
So even the will to endure grows meditative
Turning from the fire to slower gentler embers
As we recollect our once uncollected childhood,
A going with it, some ease of live and let live;
In the cumulative weight of what a heart remembers
Things tipped in a scale of yearning and understood.

John Barton

White Space, Strathcona Park

The earth is brighter than the sky,
you say, a man of few

words who talks with me
through the season's first snow

as I tell you about *Chilly Scenes of Winter*,
the movie and the book, the two of us

walking along the Rideau River toward midnight far
from some unidentified, forgotten

or fictitious American city unlike this
one with its restrained Victorian

homes, the fine details I never recognize until
you point them out, not a backdrop

to some self-conscious, now-hazy-
to-me story of jilted love undoing itself,

a character whose past I can no longer
account for, unable to let go

of the snow, of some woman who slipped through
his fingers, his psyche out

in the cold and companionless,
walking a neighbour's black lab, a constant

freeze and thaw, the mercurial snowballs
melting in his hands before he can toss them off,

footage of the dog's finely
etched prose running after nothing,

a man's sense of love and distance
learned from someone, another man, *who?*—

elegant and leafless, the branches catching
snow above our heads, the last unnameable

shade of dusk long ago drained
into the black purity of sky—

most of the above in my head but not
yet spoken as we walk, the river closing

over with ice, pewter still too
delicate to bear

weight, the shifting emphases of language,
the mere nuance

of meaning between us, a season
about to fill

cavities with snow, a storm we are
talking our way into, silence

drifting down around us, the footprints
of language ranging as far

as we wish, a path left across the unbroken
white space of Strathcona Park—

the earth is brighter than the sky—
not telling us (until we turn

back) where we have come from, snow
wind-shaken from the branches, silence

already silting in the footprints,
not telling us until we turn

back (again), lost—
our tracks circling over

themselves or others, clues found
in the snow-lined

mansards of Sandy Hill,
Chilly Scenes of Winter, half-imagined

houses snowily walked into, for once
a sense of direction arrived at

without a compass or Ann Beattie's
or someone else's directions, not telling us

until we turn back (reread hastily turned
pages) that we no longer

have (*white space and figure*)
a way or need ("love,

have I found you?") to know where
we are going.

Tom Wayman

Looking for Oregon

A freshness taints the world
in the initial hours after two who had loved
pull apart: *This is my first coffee*
since we began new lives
The fluid courses through my mouth
with odd heat
This is the first purchase I made
The controls of a familiar automobile
are unpredictable, awkward
The motor never sounded like that

And the landscape is seared:
a desert region I seem not to have travelled before
—an expanse
carpeted with sage, the far rim of the valley
hazy with remove
At the centre of the basin
a lake glitters
The water could be mirage
except
“Summer Lake,” a signboard informs
Here General Fremont’s expedition
straggled down from the harshness of
the ridge behind
on their search for temperate Oregon
They, too, observed in each direction
a vast terrain

raw
trackless

empty

Mark Anthony Jarman

Backhoe

The stolen van was home to one thousand donuts, some laced with crimson jelly, some lacking. My sister and I peppered our puzzled metabolisms, worked our jaws scarfing the contents of said donut van, spilt pounds of sugar dust in our laps. Any pilgrim or fellow travellers we gave them some, jetting gifts at any mouths that murmured. We had baking sugar epiphanies and we employed retro rockets; fly and crash, fly and crash.

A rich person, a smarter person, might decide not to eat an Econoline full of someone else's jelly donuts. Is this solemn choice one part wisdom or two parts repression? As when love, jealousy, and hate break themselves over your head: can you read the true true ratio of each? So. Can you cease consuming yourself like a cruller, cease being the less-than-exemplary creature you are? Whose belly or life is fuller?

Often police are associated with donuts in a comic manner. Not this time. Well, later they were, later the RCMP were involved. But we finished the donuts days before they found the van abandoned in the Okanagan hills where I picked cherries and apricots and peaches so many years ago. The RCMP nailed us but they got not a single donut.

They did find the \$10 receipt from the toll booth. A tiny white receipt lost on the slushy floor of the abandoned van and THEN they had the papers on us. The Bauhaus toll booth with its video cameras killed us. Evidence, dates, videotape, lenses, Desdemona's handkerchief. My sister borrowed money from the woman at the toll booth and then later I paid the woman back. Paying the money back was what actually sunk us. My brilliant idea. My brief stab at honesty, trying to be *good* just once. Jails are stuffed full of people who have not thought things through, folks who are not clear on the concept. This is no state secret.

Recounting my tale in Remand I saw others at the long steel table rub chins and say, I believe I have heard of your exploits, how you were caught. These learned fuckwads chuckle into their dun sleeves and I know most of what that chuckle means. They are in the same boat as me, exact same—Remand, Corrections, a bit less a day or the Feds if the judge is pissed off and adds a day or two and then you're working toward Club

Fed—but my snickering protégés have a need to feel superior to someone, to an idiotic other. I'm their man, their buffoon. I keep my mouth shut. This much I know.

In the spring before this soap opera unfolded I had a pretty great job running a backhoe, a blade runner working a sharp point of land, a tiny peninsula jabbing its nose into tricky ocean currents and sparkling riptides and shaking planes of light that moved me to sneezing fits if I did not avert my pale eyes.

The blandest of mornings demanded excellent sunglasses so first chance I steered my trusty prune-coloured Rambler under dusty trees and Tarzan ivy vines to the tiny drugstore to purchase inhalers and a pair of Ray-Bans. Extremely fine real estate. Gaze each way and step into another staggering view: sheets of hazy ocean sailing off toward Seattle that direction and China many leagues that way and six sea lions following each other in a line like precise bulky Rockettes just past my backhoe's knobby back wheels. Your skin warm, eyes pierced.

A cancer doctor I know in Alberta froze his eyeballs climbing mountains: brutish pain for hours when the ice in his eyes melted but he could still see, his eyes still worked.

Twelve killer whales cruised by my backhoe one sleepy afternoon, a pod blowing water like a steam train and rolling long black fins like nightsticks in the waves, harassed the entire time by whale-watching Zodiacs and sundry small craft and even a red and white floatplane carving circles above us. A dog swam in the cove and I wondered would an Orca swallow a giant poodle.

My backhoe drove sharp shores, shoveled purple and orange boulders while crab shells and bivalves were dropped and broken by gulls and shearwaters for their delight, for their seafood buffet.

Seals eyed me with professional interest and paranoid herons (they flee from me) hiding around corners in orange poppies and east of these wild poppies a snowcone sits on a volcano and to the southwest glaciers spread spectral light on a range of American mountains rising straight out of the water that divides my two countries, snow glowing up there all summer in strange light like goldbeater's skin and ocean all around us in a whispered charm and I worked the haul road listening to FM radio thinking of blue money and raising-Cain taverns in smoky American mill towns huddled under that washed India wall of mountains where the jukebox played Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard singing songs about life in prison.

William Head medium security prison, where I am incarcerated, looks out on the same view. Club Fed, the taxpayers call it. William Head has a

floating pier where we are allowed hooks and glow hoochies to fish for chinook and coho and pinks and sockeye, where the Kokanee Bandit can't find a choice spot to fish and goes nuts, yelling and pushing skimmers and rats off their side of the wharf and into the freezing sea. Cobalt seas moving on three sides and turkey vultures hanging overhead waiting for a good draft to help them cross the Strait of Juan de Fuca to another country. He shoves hard at the skimmers, nervous guests of the nation yelling and flailing like hopeless Morris dancers, then the Kokanee Bandit plunges in himself, feet-first and sloppy, swimming with a little kid's thrashing stroke far out into Quarantine Cove, into the tugs and logbooms and gloomy Indian burial islands and colonial leper colonies and American submarines hiding under the freighters in the strait. Staff gallop excitedly past the Buddhist shrine and the native sweat lodge and vandalized Wicca altar, confer at the wharf that lifts on wash: now what? This is a new one for most of them. The bullhorn lifted to lips, Excuse me, you'd better hightail it back in here right now!

"Cold day in hell when I come back to that goofjoint," he yells over the water, breathing hard, hanging onto a log as if waiting for a Haida war canoe to zip by like an Uplands bus, spiky islands ranged behind him in an infinite granite archipelago. Laughing, egging him on, I also wonder what the staff will do.

A guard produces a trim little shotgun and puts two shells in. What would that baby bring in a pawnshop? we think collectively and we all jump as he fires one loud shot at the Kokanee Bandit. A tuft of wadding blows out from the shotgun as we jump and water flies up beside the Kokanee Bandit. He lets go of the deadhead log to swim like a sullen dog back to shore. Okay people, party's over. How depressing.

Our friend has been dubbed the Kokanee Bandit because he lifted a case of Kokanee beer on the way out of the 27 beer and wine stores he robbed. His signature act, his claim to fame. He could do a very convincing Kokanee beer commercial when he leaves prison if they wish to employ him.

You better wake up, he yelled at us on the shoreline, a sodden seedy moralist, and he yelled the same in court. People on this island better wake up! Bunch of pervs here! This is the animal kingdom gone bad. I'll take Kent over all these fucking skinhounds. I'll take maximum security. I like Kent, I love Kent! In Kent I can think straight.

He waded shivering surf, chattering, hardly able to ambulate, yet our sky open and warm, weird birds in it pushing where they wish to push. He's right: there are too many sex offenders here now; it creates some tension.

The William Head prisoners staged a vampire play years back and at night a convict escaped on a coffin, floating rough seas like Ishmael on a

stage-prop coffin. I don't know if the screws ever found this cowboy. You could be drowning and you're all alone and pulled eight directions in razor-rock channels. Maybe the guy with the coffin got away. Just this month an inmate with one leg tried to swim out through the riptides off the maintenance shop. The amputee was in the fifth year of a fifteen-year bit. Ten more years. He could not wait. He didn't have a coffin to cling to.

Walking along the foggy shore at daylight I thought I saw plastic bags floating toward me, but it was our amputee, something siphoned from him, neck limp, face down in the misty sea, white hands brushing the rocky shores of our very private peninsula. Peninsulas that taper and distant peninsulas that end in a pencil line and sink under the waves with seabirds squabbling and whistling, grebes with their skinny necks and beady eyes diving under the amputee, and white noise waves that drive us to this shore, waves in my ears rhythmic and endless—don't hear them after a while. A tug in the distance pulling a barge, seeming to get nowhere. The amputee went away briefly but he came right back to our bored arms, his brain on hold, no pulse, no red flash. What was in there that has left the building? Where did it go? Where did *he* go? Escaped: here but not here. I found what was left to float like a jellyfish, dead man float we used to do at the city pool. The sun feels warm but freezing seawater seizes your buffed-out muscles. You try to move but your limbs are jelly, torn sails, a jail.

People from the city drive out to the jail to stare at plays we perform; cling to the Kangaroo Road, purchase a ticket at the country store and an affable prisoner chauffeurs you the last stretch in a green Corrections school bus. Past the conjugal trailers, under the towers and video cams. The old driver sells his cedar cigar boxes and native carvings to the visitors. He's become a good carver since he's been inside. Inside we favour Beckett, Sartre, Greek tragedies. Our prison productions are festive and paranoid at the same time.

At William Head we live in housekeeping units with four bedrooms and dishes and chores and forks and steak knives. It's a new approach in Corrections, preparation for life in the world. We have to take turns cooking, though some guys refuse and get someone else to cook their day, exchange some favour. Some of these men do not know how to open a can or turn on a vacuum. We are being taught how to turn on a vacuum.

However, two tough older cons in our common room, fueled on homebrew, start arguing over which TV channel to watch (I'm not kidding) and out come the rolling pin and steak knives supplied care of the Feds. First it's the rolling pin to the teeth, and that old guy drops with splintered molars, but then, to my amazement, he springs back up, mad and fast with a flashing steak knife. Now Rolling Pin Guy crashes down on the new broadloom and Smashed Teeth Guy cuts the writhing man's

throat open, slashes this giant new mouth on the front of his gargling neck, then starts slowly sawing Rolling Pin Guy's head off while he's still alive, cutting in a bloody methodical rage through the man's voicebox, cutting and cutting at the knuckled links in the man's spinal column like it's a hard corn cob.

The bloody beheading takes some time, some diligence to draw toward an end for you, sir. Smashed Teeth Guy's applying himself, he's mad, but knows a hawk from a handsaw, knows he's never going free now. Covered in blood, head bowed as if in prayer, fight suddenly gone from him. There goes the new broadloom (Shout it out), the new approach, the Alternative to Violence Workshops. Back to the drawing board, back to maximum security, back to the hole for No Teeth Guy, and no more pastel condo by the ocean. *Location location location!* Just when he was getting healthy, his teeth filled, getting his shit together. Several of us roomies stare at him in shock, the half-severed head drooling blood at his knees, then we silently slide (wanting to vomit) over to the next building with the pool table and telephone and mailbox; pretend we've been hanging there the whole time.

One traumatized roomie immediately transferred out to another prison; he couldn't deal with it. I have had Technicolour nightmares about this murder. In one version I'm being beheaded. In the other version I'm doing the beheading. Don't know which I like least.

You know what is a pain about prison? No one cares about your beef but they all assume you'd love to hear theirs. Everyone beefs all day long: at the meals, at the pool table, watching TV, writing puzzled letters, washing the steak knives, feeding the resident raccoons and cats and deer under the coils of razor wire, bitching about case managers or bragging about women (*slept with Tina Turner I did*) or how much smack they've beaten through their bent livers or protesting their innocence (*wasn't me what pushed her off the balcony*). Standing around at lockdown, our brains of pink coral breathing like tongues, you hear the crackling walkie-talkies and older guards' voices calling out in the dusk over the concertina wire and you think of people downtown at Swan's pub lifting a cool pint of Bavarian with art on the walls and women walking between oak tables in light bouncing from the harbour and no jukebox songs about life in prison and on this shore our collection of brains under the rain clouds, the cloud factory behind the American mountains, our addled brains, our puzzled brains: *How'd I end up here?*

Doubtless I will find trouble at the border from now on: men and women in uniform, and me blinking on their baby computers. Our summer camp that never ends.

From the seat of my Case 580K backhoe our city seemed small and harmless in the distance, a puppet city hovering over water with angelic

seaplanes riding high past hills, logbooms and tugboats, sawdust barges and sailboats pulling splashing dinghies, flat-bottomed Zodiacs zipping fast as coffee through tricky channels, ripping through rocky islands right offshore and me swivelling neatly to and fro in my yellow backhoe.

A million views: one person cannot take them all in. And when his house sits on the earth, one man will own each view I knew. Property—the first hard division of the mantle of earth. Will we be invited, industrious citizens that measured and made the mansion, those that swore and dug and hammered full of grim percussion? Will we be invited back to the house we built? Don't hold your breath. And if I was a rich man would I do any different?

One morning on that backhoe job the water was so low—a negative tide—that I walked to an island, scrambled slippery rocks in my city shoes, climbed a cliff and on top of the steep chimneyed island a windy complaining rookery.

This is my island now, I yelled at the wheeling birds. Pay me rent! I'm your new landlord! The warden! I'm your puppet.

I made bird faces and stomped about but was secretly careful not to disturb any nests in the tall yellow grass. For seagulls I was considerate! Is there any shortage of gulls? No. What a fool. This island trek, this parting of the water made me happy.

In this negative tide I saw a sailboat strike an underwater rock with its keel. They swore mightily, late for their regatta and drinks. They couldn't back off and sat to wait grumpily for the tide to lift them, give them freedom. They were not there fifteen years.

On the haul road rock trucks came and rock trucks went, doing rounders, and neighbours in sunhats grumbled and stared but often I worked by myself. No one on my case. The grader broke down and the clay punched out of the haul road, leaving holes that broke your back, drove your spine into your skull, but that was a decent job.

In the rock we drilled holes the width of hot dogs and blasted and split and scratched to find the T-shaped foundation drawn on the blueprints.

An old Newfoundland dog wandered down each morning to stand in deep water, to ease his sore bones amid the sea sorting and cooling its gravel and glass on the sloping beach and trees blossoming like Salish sweaters.

Occasionally the landowner drove out to watch, climbing out of his V12 Mercedes with a childlike smile, his white Scottish face flushing red with pleasure. From the Old French *plaisir: to please*. He waited years to knock down his farmhouse. Now he's a laird lifting up a glass pyramid full of native art and star blankets. A chain crossing the driveway with

fluorescent ribbons whipping in the sea breeze. Private Property. He owns private property all over this city, a hotel and pub, a bakery, nightclubs, gentrified apartments. No flies on this silver-haired boy. He has no wife, no family, no toll booths. He has real estate and dotted lines and silver glasses and serial lawsuits.

My machine touched each of his stones lightly, convincing each block of the glacier's rock where it must now live in the seawall. I was like a mother with a precious infant child. That light a touch.

Children on the beach imitated me, digging with plastic dump trucks and tin excavators. Three boys studied me, my yellow backhoe, read out CASE 580K from the shovel of my machine. Three children studied me and I studied the rich man, as if he was a blueprint you could read.

When I have monied moments with monied people I study the trim words living in their symmetrical mouths and I try to think as they think, be like they might be, but in the flesh I can't pin down what transpires, what exactly they prove, moment to buzzing moment, to claim and deserve it.

Perhaps this is like trying to watch someone pray.

The guards (*the furniture* we call them) confiscated my cat, trucked it to the SCPA. I trained it to hide under the bed during inspections but someone reported it and they raided. Sometimes the female guards are the hardest cases, which you don't expect. But I have made my peace with lowered expectations. Often I am happy as a clam just to tag along for the ride, a passive passenger, mobile in terms of miles put on, but stretched out lazily in back of a roomy American-made car, say early Paul Butterfield Blues Band on the tape deck, Mike Bloomfield on lead guitar, Butterfield and Bloomfield both on heroin, both dead from their smack, all of our heads empty of maps, empty of nitpicking neurons or knowledge, head empty of destinations or coveted granite islands. I leave that responsibility, THAT, to someone else.

I am a fast form flitting under cool underpasses and gliding finely engineered shoulders and curves, these nearly perfect roads, these garden paths. I am a savage luge rider rocketing through the amazing system but I'm not entirely engaged, not actually plugged in so to speak. What is peripheral is pointed and pleasant.

I am not a wheelman, not a triggerman, just a passenger glancing up past hills of ponderosa pine to appreciate fully, to murmur in a stoned voice, *Cool cloud*. Data and stardust up there in files, possibilities. Sky is the best blue. Is there a better blue?

Not a wheelman, I insisted to the court-appointed lawyer. *A passenger*.

The Crown hoped to prove I was a wheelman in the Penticton and Kelowna robberies where the Chinese kid got shot in the ass or the one

where Werner claimed fruit punch in a syringe was AIDS blood.

I thought Werner's prank with the syringe showed imagination. The legal question: does fruit punch constitute theatre or indictable weaponry? Imagine it's your parents' store and the silver needle with the tiniest eye is aimed at you. The eye never closes and the Crown wants Federal time for provincial transgressions.

Sea otters close their eyes clutching onto kelp; they tie themselves to kelp and sleep. I saw several otters while working by the ocean. I thought of them sleeping peacefully in the coast's swaying kelp while we were on edge in the mountain blizzard or knocking over nervous drugstores in the Interior, our heads full of snow, mouths full of powdered donuts. The pharmacies wait for you now, resigned, stoic; you are part of the equation, you are overhead, a business expense they would love to deduct.

My pale sister and her boyfriend Werner boosted a white van full of donuts and the three of us rolled happily toward Hope and the expensive hot springs and the sudden sullen mountains.

My sister didn't know about the toll booth at the top of the pass. I was not thinking clearly; clearly I was a passenger. I liken myself to Switzerland in the war.

We climbed straight into blizzard echelons in a van from Van with skinny summer tires that made us feel hardly conjoined to the icy hills and climbs and tense tunnels and curves. We were lunar, on some frozen bulbous moon, on a light bulb.

Cars down the ditches and every car in the ditch looking like it had flown off sideways in a big swath that the snow and light started filling in immediately, leaving the fine sedan stranded, a melancholy nervous vista.

My sister failed to read the fine print on the tires before she boosted the van. You wish the murderous journey had no corners, you could just go straight with some dignity.

With ice, contact is erased, the contract changed. You're alone, abandoned, out of real time; it can't help but seem a warning. Your stomach drops from your abdomen but it's also fun.

It wasn't snowing in Vancouver; why on earth is it snowing up here?

The snowy toll booth looms above us like a bleak windmill, an icy guard tower in dark glass and concrete and coffee breaks, lemon lights and wheeling whipping gusts testing the smoked windows.

At William Head the guards hate pulling time in the tower; the furniture get so bored watching over us pilgrims, watching the mindless waves and the empty parking lot.

Why is the toll booth leaning up here in the middle-of-nowhere stormy mountains? The government must have its reasons. Likely this was the first part of the highway completed before Expo 86. They put the toll

booth here to start collecting revenue, some dinero. The staff drives hours to get to work, to stand guard where sharp fir and dark unfocused mountains dwarf our paltry line of vehicles huddled in snow and exhaust vapour and tail lights, cars stopping as if at a cold war checkpoint and a camera hanging above, giving us the lubricated eyeball.

Werner! You have any money for the toll booth? Nope.

Three losers who can't come with ten bucks between us. What are we going to do?

My sister was amazing talking to the woman working the toll booth. My sister rolled down her window, drew in breath, and soon she had ME believing that my mother was dead, that we were speeding to the funeral in Jasper, beside ourselves, no time to think, no time to stop by our bank, stunned by the terrible news, our loss, upset, grieving, moping misty-eyed at the thought of our sad bereavement. Werner's face beside me was both red and white like some European flag.

My sister was unnaturally good. Our loss started to be real, and I began to pine for this imaginary mother who I imagined as resembling an older Betty Crocker.

Hang on, Ma! We're coming, Ma!

My sister should be in Hollywood, she's wasting her life (unlike the rest of us). Depths and tempting green hallways in her eyes and a golden sensual tongue. Definitely Oscar material. The camera likes her but it can't catch her.

The woman working the toll booth listened and considered, a tight mailbox of a mouth, then she paid our ten-dollar toll out of her own pocket. She handed my sister an empty brown envelope. The clerk had written her own name and clerk number on the empty envelope.

On the way back drop off this envelope with the ten dollars, okay?

The woman at the toll booth (*You're a life-saver!*) also gave us a tiny receipt which my sister let flutter to the floor of the stolen van where it would be discovered later, after the robberies, by the RCMP who always get their man and where women and minorities are especially encouraged to apply.

In Remand my mind went back to my lazy excavation work, running the backhoe by the ocean with rusty Russian freighters and seals drifting past me. Sailboats with the jib and mainsail down, a little toy engine pushing, tall naked masts moving the way giraffes on television move their long lonely necks, masts moving awkwardly past on slow rhythmic waves, and I'd be hitting a midden pile, crunching into the past, shells and bones and carbon stripes, my bucket grinding into some Songhees tribe with the white sea in their heads, the white sea in my head.

My straw boss made it clear: you hit any middens or dead and gone tribes or skulls or bones or graves or native artifacts you keep digging. Don't tell a soul.

I dream of running the backhoe in sunlight off the sea but I want to make this clear. I don't pity myself now. I pity myself back then, whistling and working happily, not knowing that I was going to jail and fingered for a rat, that I'd come out of court and find a dead rat in a plastic bag on the front seat of my Rambler. I was working on that seawall just as innocent as a baby with building blocks and the fact is no baby knows a thing worth a tinker's damn, that's how I feel right now.

The RCMP find the receipt. They talk to the toll booth staff. We're all there still on snowy video, every car rolling through like smoke is recorded on video. They watch the clerk hand us a brown envelope, back it up, watch her hand it over again.

Why sure, she remembers, I lent them ten dollars. They gave me donuts for the whole staff. And me trying to slim down. A few days later they came through again going south and dropped off my ten dollars. Paid me back.

They paid you back?! Brought back the ten dollars?! The RCMP are in shock.

The RCMP go back to the video, fast forward to the right day and see the taxi we took from Kamloops en route back to Vancouver, the taxi with the plush purple upholstery and the East Indian driver who leased it. I like cruising in those big V8 American numbers: *Rollin rollin rollin keep those dawgies rollin*. On the video they can make out the cab's number and company logo. They call up the driver in Kamloops.

Yes yes, says the driver, yes I remember them: I always insist on cash on the dash, pay up front and they did. Much cash. They were drinking alcohol, they were gunned, they were testing the portal vein.

—Mr. Driver? You having fun?

—Oh yes. I am having fun.

—We're fun people!

—Leave him be.

—I want to talk to our *chauffeur*. I want to make sure everyone's happy.

—Yeah yeah right. Good road. Why is it here?

—It's easier than the Hell's Canyon route.

—And because the suntanned Premier and his suntanned friends bought a bunch of real estate up this way.

Here's the address in Vancouver, the taxi driver tells the police. One guy got out by himself near the Sky Train, but the couple I dropped off at this address.

They gave their own address! Why didn't Werner and my sister get out down the block? Why give your own address? Retards.

Everyone concerned remembers us. They must all be taking those Dale Carnegie lessons.

If I hadn't insisted on stopping to pay back the ten dollars we would not have been picked up. I thought it would be a classy touch to pay the clerk back. Bonnie and Clyde.

The SWAT crew put on their strangest black and yellow costumes and, hyped for door-wrecking, drove straight to my sister's address in Kitsilano, knew exactly where to find them, so Werner and my sister become convinced I ratted on them, cut a deal with the narc squad. All because we paid the woman in the toll booth her ten dollars back.

The Crown decides I'm the wheelman, and not just a passenger. As they say in the dark fields of Texas, if you hang long enough you get used to hanging.

Werner tried to explain his idea to me by the orchard the bank had repossessed: a thief steals something it's because he put a value on it, but now a fascist takes something because *you* put a value on it. Of course the net result is the same, he giggles.

Oh, thanks for clearing that up, Weiner.

In the backhoe's worn out seat, I alone controlled the levers, pushed hydraulics like blood in an artery wall, I had power and vision, my back like teeth on a string. I pretended I was a Pharoah's architect piecing together a new tomb in the Valley of the Kings. That time on the beach working for a rich man seems like someone else's time now. I was a puppy, a chicken; now I'm a new fish.

Pre-fish. Trying to decide who to rob. You assume the mellow neighbourhood grocery keeps a whack of dough around; they must be flogging hundreds of Lotto tickets when the jackpot climbs up near \$17 million. But the whole Chinese family comes running out to defend their stash, lay some chopsocky karate moves on Werner and my stunned sister.

Werner went down like a tree under this crazy family, his finger on the slim silver gun and his gun popped, action, reaction, and there's a stray cap embedded in this teenage kid's skinny ass and he's okay but mamasan is freaking, ends up writhing down on the floor. She has a bad heart. The store has it on video. Smile. Cameras everywhere now.

Werner and sister exit stage left. Obviously the kid's not totally happy getting shot in the ass but it's nothing serious. The mother, however, decides on a heart attack and in the *voir dire* the lawyers say this doesn't look so good, they're implying her heart attack is our fault, that her heart

attack opens yet another can of worms. *Six hundred and fifty dollars* Werner paid for a clean gun. Weapons charges carry a minimum four-year bit under the new laws.

While they were shooting this skinny kid in his skinny bullet-prone ass I was in the Toyota riceburner waiting, parked by a school (grocery stores always by a school). Toyotas are easy to get into. I guess in Japan they don't steal.

The donut van was already history; we ditched it by an orchard near Naramata on that windy road by the repossessed orchard. Werner and my sister thought it wise to change vehicles, take the Toyota, lose the van, get rid of evidence, links. They thought they were using their brains.

When my day in court came I admit I was graceless trash, was less than articulate. The Xerox in pieces on the floor and nowhere lawyers sweating and popping Roloids by slabs of marble and coffee tasting like a foreign language. Not my world. I am not a rat, I decided looking around the courthouse. I decided to say nothing in this world.

Clerk: You have to stand up to be sworn. Please take the Bible in your right hand. Please state your full name for the court.

Me: I'm not testifying.

Judge: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you.

Clerk: Spell your last name.

Me: I'm not testifying.

Clerk: You have to stand up.

Me: Charge me. Whatever you want.

Judge: I find you guilty of contempt in the face of this court.

Me: Up yours.

Judge: I sentence you to a period of incarceration of six months consecutive to any—

Me: Fuck you, you goof.

Judge: Time now being served or assigned.

Me: Goof.

Judge: Get him out of here.

Crown: I think the case has not been advanced by that witness's attendance.

Judge: That would seem to be the case.

Crown: No further evidence to call.

I tried to demonstrate to an invisible audience that I am not a rat, not a performing seal, not a killer whale jumping through a hoop (jumping the waves that drive us to this shore).

The children play with plastic bulldozers and the children's mother finds the dead otter on the beach and throws the otter's limp carcass in the

bushes so the kids won't see something like that. Her children play with bulldozers in the sand. Why can't you share? she asks in tense falsetto. Why can't you share? A blonde boy hammers together a raft from long driftwood logs, wanting to strike out, *escape*.

Some predator found the otter while it was dreaming, tied into the kelp, tied up, while Werner's arm was tied off, while we were driving the donut van in the Interior.

In the Interior we entered towns that consisted of FOR SALE signs, where it seemed entire populations were herniated. There were sun-wrinkled dwarves in those orchard towns. Repo men and tow trucks and bailiffs took away their most valued pieces. There were sun-wrinkled dwarves in those orchard towns offered extended warranties, new roofs, earthquake insurance, Lotto tickets. And we were the same, took from them just a little more. How do you like them apples?

I picked apples here in these hot spicy valleys. Plums too. Peaches full of beetles but beautiful plump cherries, if the rain didn't split them. The Bank of Montreal owned the orchard on the hilly meadows that slanted down to the cliff above the lake.

Alive in aluminum, we shall gather by the trailer park, by the river, or we'll sleep on the grass strip beside the beach until the programmed sprinklers come on in the middle of the night to soak us and keep us moving, keep us away from the beach, keep the tourists from seeing our bent figures dragging sodden US army sleeping bags.

The man with property wanted a channel carved, wanted real seawater to cut right under his new glass and girder palace so his suspect men friends inside the house would be suitably impressed gazing at a piece of ocean brought inside or maybe they'd drop their sore ugly feet in the saltwater and wait for some rough trade equivalent of Mary Magdalene with her long convenient hair and questionable heritage.

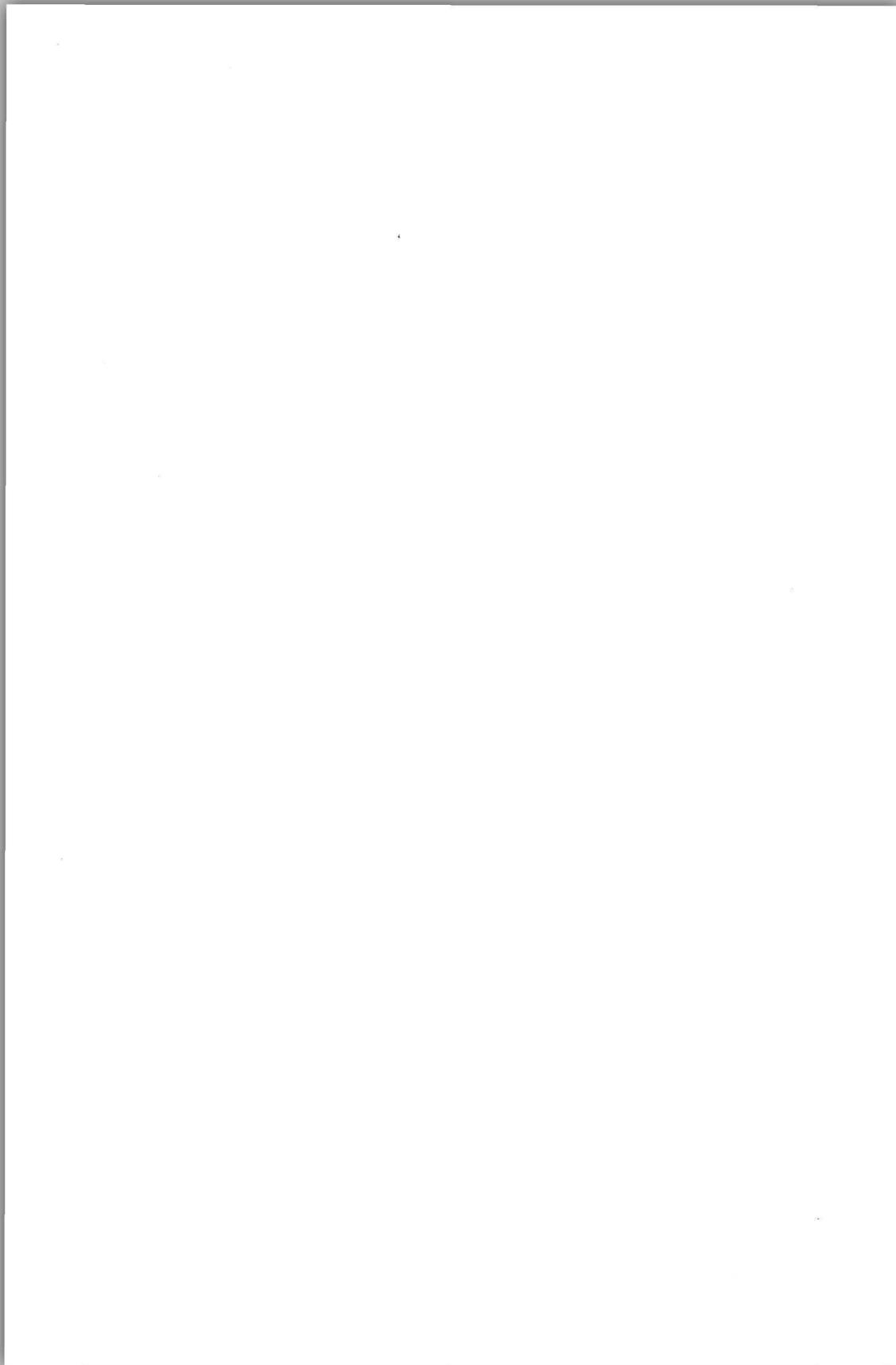
I wondered if this channel idea was legal. The rich man did not hold a gun to my head. The children play, do not want to share. The children's paths are faint in the sawgrass and wildflowers. The man's property is above the highwater mark. Below that is public land. Below that belongs to all of us.

At the toll booth I tried to do the right thing, pay the \$10 back my sister conned, pay back the woman, and that \$10 was the only link to us, the only evidence, and it sunk us, sunk me. I did it and someday they'll try to get me, maybe sink a sharpened toothbrush into my kidney. That would be original.

I have my Class 1 with Air, my Dangerous Goods Certificate, my WHMIS card; I've built and destroyed, rattled up and down punched-out haul roads with my sore back like a pinched concertina, climbed into black halls of mountains and into eye-piercing points of television light. I've been an incoherent passenger lying over the gnashing gears and I've been a wheelman working rented reptile sides of my brain. But I am not a rat. I refuse to sit on the rat side of the pier. I won't fish on that goof-ghetto side of the pier. I don't want to be shoved in freezing Quarantine Cove or feel a sharpened toothbrush suddenly ratchet and manoeuvre between my ribs. But really, who does?

Should I have dug that channel on the shore? I wore cool sunglasses and ingested inhalers, a village idiot bombing my own larder, a shovel with hands crunching madly in middens, a stuttering machine with sugar and sand swimming in the gas tank

The rich man does not own the shoreline. I own the shore if you want to get technical.



Contributors

John Barton's most recent book of poems, *Designs from the Interior*, was published by House of Anansi in 1994. His seventh collection, *Sweet Ellipsis*, is forthcoming from ECW. Poems have been published or are forthcoming in *The Malahat Review*, *Capilano Review*, *Prairie Fire*, *Dandelion*, *The American Voice*, and *Queen's Quarterly*.

Di Brandt's most recent poetry collection, *Jerusalem, beloved* (Turnstone Press, 1995) received the CAA National Poetry Award and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, the McNally Robinson Award for Manitoba Book of the Year, and the Pat Lowther Award. She teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor.

Wayde Compton is a Vancouver writer. His poetry has appeared in *Abisnthe*, *Boo*, *Diaspora*, *Mix*, *PRISM international* (28:2) and *West Coast Line*. An essay on voodoo and black literature is forthcoming in *Matatu: Journal of African Culture and Society*. He serves as the Chair of Communications for the Black Cultural Association of British Columbia and is currently working on a poetry manuscript concerning the black presence in BC since 1858 titled *49th Parallel Psalm*.

Holly Day lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her son, Wolfgang, and their cat, Calypso. She currently works as a music journalist for *RockLove Magazine*.

Michael Day lived in China for seven years during the 1980s and early 1990s, during which time he worked closely with a number of China's better-known younger poets. He has recently served as translation editor for New Mexico's *yefief*, and is now in Prague. His translations of poetry by Zhai Yong-ming appeared in *PRISM* 34:1.

Han Dong was born in 1961 in Nanjing, China. His father, a well-known writer, was condemned as a rightist and he and his family were sent to the countryside to live with and learn from the farmers. He is one of the mainstays and co-founders of *Them*, China's longest-standing self-published poetry journal. In 1994, Han Dong was one of eight writers from all parts of China awarded a two-year position in the newly established Youth Literature Institute in Canton.

Kendra Fanconi's first poem, age five: *I like you, I like you/alot alot/ You're as sweet as a pebble/a stone in my heart/You're very very nice/I like you alot/Goodbye now I've got to trot.* She stays true to this theme, collecting her likes in a marble bag heart. Too, she trots. Although, trying to curb the latter, she has touched down in Vancouver.

Yannis Goumas lives in Greece where he writes, translates, composes, broadcasts and, until recently, was vice-president of the family shipping concern, a position he gave up to become a full-fledged actor. His work has appeared in *The Malahat Review*, *PRISM international* (34:4), *London Magazine*, *Poetry Review*, and many others. He is also author of nine books of poetry in English and three in Greek.

Richard Harrison's poems are part of a forthcoming book, *Big Breath of a Wish*, centred on his daughter's discovery/invention of language from her birth to her first birthday. He currently lives in Calgary where he teaches Creative Writing and English at Mount Royal College.

Mark Anthony Jarman's latest short fiction collection, *New Orleans is Sinking* (Oberon), is out this spring. His novel, *Salvage King Ya!*, was published by Anvil Press in 1997 and his stories appeared in the *Journey Prize* and *Best Canadian Stories* anthologies for that year; he has also been nominated for inclusion in the *Puschart Prize* anthology by *CutBank* (University of Montana).

George Murray currently lives in Toronto but was raised in rural Ontario. His poetry and fiction have been published in *Event*, *The Fiddlehead*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Queen Street Quarterly*, and *beet-red*. He is the managing editor of *Smoke, A Journal of Literary Prose*.

Micheal O'Siadhail is a poet whose collections include *Hail! Madam Jazz: New and Selected*, *A Fragile City* and *Our Double Time* (all from Bloodaxe). He has read and broadcast his poetry widely in Ireland, Britain, Europe, and North America. He was awarded the Irish American Cultural Institute Poetry Prize in 1982.

John Pass's most recent book is *Radical Innocence* (Harbour, 1994). Poems in this issue are from *Water Stair*, a collection exploring convergences and collisions between romance and landscape. He has been published previously in *PRISM international* (35:2).

David Robinson is a Vancouver sculptor whose recent *Inhabitants* project placed life-sized plaster human figures in various public settings, including in the Pacific Cinématèque theatre, on a city bus, and at the Vancouver Maritime Museum wharf. He has exhibited across Canada and is represented in private, corporate, and museum collections.

Karen Shklanka's poetry appears in *Conception*, a chapbook edited by Patrick Lane. In 1997, she won a position in the BC Festival of the Arts poetry competition. She is a family physician on Saltspring Island, BC, and previously worked with the James Bay Cree in northern Ontario.

Esta Spalding's poetry books include *Carrying Place* and *Anchoress*, which is shortlisted for the Canadian Bookseller's Librius Award. Her third collection, *Lost August*, will be published by House of Anansi Press in 1999. She lives in Vancouver.

Guillermo Verdecchia is a recipient of the Governor General's Award for Drama and a four-time winner of the Chalmers Canadian Play Award. His short fiction has appeared in various literary magazines.

Tom Wayman last appeared in PRISM 34:2. For the past few years he has been co-head of the writing program at the Kootenay School of the Arts in Nelson, BC. His most recent collection is *I'll Be Right Back: New and Selected Poems 1980-1996* (Ontario Review Press, 1997). An anthology of contemporary love poems he edited, *The Dominion of Love*, is forthcoming from Polestar Press.

Pamela J. Woodside is a freelance writer currently living in Springfield, Missouri, where she homeschools her two children, sings in a band, grows herbs, and writes fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction.

Wang Yin, a native of Shanghai, China, was born in 1962.

Gary Young started writing seriously when his wife was in hospital giving birth to their son, Sam. He has collaborated with Vitol Dance Company (UK) on *By Force or Fantasy*, and this year with *Nothing But the Truth*. He wrote with Louis Dempsey and Andrew Howard on the film *Shooters*. Gary lives in Newcastle, England.

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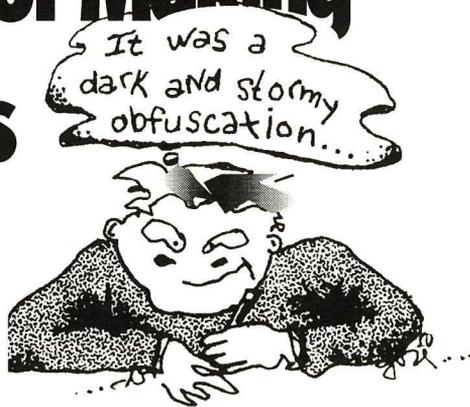
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*I'm saying I go blind on one side
every time you block the light
by leaning in to kiss.*

— George Murray, Page 48

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Michael Day
Han Dong
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Yannis Goumas
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