PRISM *international*

Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world

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1991 Fiction Contest Winners

PRISM *international*

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Roxanna Bikadoroff Monster with Girl who is bringing him home (ink & guache on paper)

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1991 Short Fiction Contest Winners

$2000 Prize: **Eden Robinson,** Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
"Dogs In Winter"

$200 Prize: **Leslee Becker,** Fort Collins, Colorado, U.S.A.
"The Personals"

$200 Prize: **Danuta Gleed,** Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
"One Of The Chosen"

$200 Prize: **Darleen Quaife,** Priddis, Alberta, Canada
"The I Ching Of Shoes"

$200 Prize: **Wendy Mai Rawlings,** Fort Collins, Colorado, U.S.A.
"Kissing Back"

$200 Prize: **Linda Raymond,** Orangevale, California, U.S.A.
"Book Of Questions"

1991 Finalists

John Isaacs, U.S.A.	"Georgie's Habit"
Roberta Reese, Canada	"Hand Of A Thief"
Gayla Reid, Canada	"Sister Doyle's Men"
Jerry Saviano, U.S.A.	"Toothpaste And Monkey

We would like to extend a special thank you to Susan Musgrave, this year's final judge, and to Terry Armstrong, our Fiction Contest Manager.

Dogs in Winter

Eden Robinson

1. *WARNING: Sex

Aunt Genna's poodle, Picnic, greeted people by humping their legs. He had an incredible grip. A new postman dragged Picnic six blocks. Picnic hopped and ground as they went; the postman swore and whacked the poodle with his mailbag.

"Picnic is the most affectionate animal I know," Aunt Genna said when the S.P.C.A. arrived at our door to take Picnic away. "He should not be punished for his love."

Picnic, however, humped the wrong legs when he burst out of our lilac bushes and made love to Officer Wilkenson's calves. On that fateful day, I was lounging on the porch swing, watching humming birds buzz around the bird feeder. On this quiet, lazy summer afternoon, traffic on the nearby highway was pleasantly muted.

"What the fuck are you doing!" a man yelled.

I sat up. A policeman was trying to pry Picnic off. Picnic was going at it steady as a jack hammer.

"Frank! Get this thing off me!" the policeman said to his partner, who was unhelpfully snapping Polaroids.

The policeman lifted his leg and kicked it out. Picnic hopped off and attacked the other leg. Officer Wilkenson gave Picnic a kick that would have disabled a lesser dog. Not Picnic.

Eventually, with the help of a broom handle, the two police officers managed to quell Picnic's passion.

"Oh my," Aunt Genna said, arriving on the porch with a tray of lemonade. Aunt Genna was the very picture of a Victorian Lady. That day, she was wearing her hair up in a big, salt and pepper puff-bun at the back of her head. The lace on her dress fluttered as she rushed down the steps to the walkway where the policemen stood. "Is something wrong? Has Picnic been hurt?"

*At the beginning of certain sections, WARNINGS for such topics as *Sex, Death, and/or Immorality,* implied or explicit, will be put up for those readers who might be offended and wish to skip over said sections.

"Is. This. Your. Dog," Officer Wilkenson hissed.

"Why, yes," Aunt Genna said, putting the tray down. She knelt down to stroke Picnic's head. "Oh, pookums. Did the nasty man hurt you?"

Picnic whimpered.

"Nasty man! Nasty man!" Aunt Genna shouted. "How could you hurt my helpless pookums! Look what you did to his darling new hair-do! Nasty, dirty man!"

I shrank down in the swing. Aunt Genna grabbed the broom from Officer Wilkenson and wonked him over the head with it.

"I will speak to your superior officer about this," Aunt Genna said crisply.

"Could you do that again?" Officer Wilkenson's partner said to Aunt Genna, holding up his camera. "I missed it."

2. WARNING: Death

There is a lake I go to in my dreams. Mama took me to it the first time I got my period.

In my dreams, she and I are sitting on the shore, playing kazoos. Mama has a blue kazoo; mine is pink. We play something classical. Mozart, I think. Crickets are chirping. The sun is rising slowly over the mountains. The lake is cool and dark and flat as glass.

A moose crashes through the underbrush. It lumbers to the edge of the lake, then raises its head and bellows.

Mama puts her kazoo down slowly. She reaches behind her and pulls a shotgun from her dufflebag. She steadies it on her shoulder, takes aim, then gently squeezes the trigger.

The shot sounds like fireworks. A hole appears on the moose's head. I don't know what I expected, maybe the moose's head to explode like a dropped pumpkin, but not the tidy red hole. It collapses forward, head first into the water.

"Let's go get breakfast," Mama says.

Wearing a blue dress, I walk slowly into the lake. The pebbles on the shore are all rose quartz, round and smooth as ping pong balls. As I go deeper into the lake, my dress floats up around me. When I am in up to my waist, I see the moose surfacing. The moose rises out of the water, its coat dripping, its eyes filled with dirt. It towers over me, whispering, mud dribbling from its mouth like saliva. I lean towards it, but no matter how hard I try, I can never understand what it's saying.

3. WARNING: Death

I can't remember the first time I saw Aunt Genna. She was just always there, like the sun, and sky, and furniture. One of her dogs—Jenjen, Coco, or Picnic—was always following her. Although she was born in the 1930's in Bended River, Manitoba, she liked to believe she was a Lady from England. We had tea parties every Sunday after church. Aunt Genna brought out her plastic dishes and sat the dogs on cushions. Jenjen and Coco loved tea time. I would serve them doggie biscuits on plates with pictures of blue bears and red balloons on them. Picnic didn't like to sit at the table and howled until Aunt Genna let him go to his hallway chair.

Since I wasn't allowed to have real tea, Aunt Genna filled the silver tea pot with grape juice.

"How are you today, Lady Lisa?" she would ask, in her best English accent.

"Oh, I am quite fine," I would say. "And yourself?"

"I am quite well, except that I have gout."

"Oh, how awful! Is it very painful?"

"It makes my nose itchy."

"Would you like a sugar cookie?"

"I would adore one."

It was at one of these tea parties that I first asked about my parents. Jenjen was gnawing at her biscuit, spreading crumbs on the table. Coco and Picnic were howling. I poured grape juice for both of us then said, "Are my parents dead?"

"No," Aunt Genna said. "They are in Africa."

I crawled onto Aunt Genna's lap. "What are they doing in Africa?"

"They are both doctors and great explorers. They wanted so very much to take you with them, but there are too many snakes and tigers and elephants in Africa. They were afraid you would be eaten."

"But why did they go?"

"They went because they were needed there. There are very few doctors in Africa, you see, and every single one counts."

"But why did they go?"

"Lady Lisa," Aunt Genna said, kissing the top of my head. "My Lady Lisa, they didn't want to leave you. Your mother cried and cried when they took you out of her arms. Oh, how she cried. She was so very sad."

"They why did she go?"

"She had no choice. Duty called. She was called to Africa."

"Was my father called too?"

Aunt Genna sighed. "Yes. Your mother called him with her. They went together."

"When are they coming back?"

"Not for a long, long, long time."

I put my arms around her and cried.

"But I will always be here for you," she said, patting my back. "I will always be here, my Lady Lisa."

Aunt Genna told me many things. She told me there was a Santa Claus, an Easter Bunny, and a Tooth Fairy. She told me there were monsters in the world, but all you had to do was be a good girl, and they wouldn't get you. I always believed Aunt Genna, until Mama killed her.

4. WARNING: Death & Immorality

I was fourteen when I first tried to commit suicide. I remember it clearly because it was New Year's Eve. Paul and Janet were at a Costume Ball and thought I was with friends. Paul was a pirate and Janet was a princess.

They drove me to my friend's house. Paul put his eyepatch on his chin so it wouldn't bother him while he drove. I sat in the back, at peace with myself. In my mind, I was seeing my foster parents at my funeral, standing grief-stricken at my open casket, gazing down at my calm face.

When they let me off, I walked back home. I brought all Janet's Midol and all Paul's stomach pills upstairs to my bedroom where I had already stashed two bottles of aspirin. I went back downstairs and got three bottles of gingerale and a large plastic tumbler.

I then wrote a poem for Paul and Janet. It was three pages long. At the time, I thought it was epic and moving. I squirm when I think about it now. I'm glad I didn't die. What a horrible piece of writing to be remembered by. It was something right out a soap opera: "My Darling Parents, I must leave/I know you will, but you must not grieve" sort of thing. I guess it wouldn't have been so bad if I hadn't rhymed everything.

I poured all the aspirin into a cereal bowl. Deciding to get it all over at once, I stuffed a handful into my mouth. God, the taste. Dusty and bitter aspirin crunched in my mouth like hard-shelled bugs. My gag reflex set in, and I lost about twenty aspirin on my quilt. I chug-a-lugged three cups of gingerale to get the taste out of my mouth, then took it more slowly and swallowed the pills one by one.

After the twenty-sixth aspirin, I stopped counting and concentrated on not throwing up. I didn't have enough money to get more pills, and I

didn't want to waste anything. When I got to the bottom of the cereal bowl, I'd had enough. I'd also run out of gingerale. Bile was leaking into my mouth. Much later, I discovered that overdosing on aspirin is one of the worst ways to go. Aspirin is toxic, but the amount needed to kill a grown adult is so high, the suicider's stomach usually bursts before toxicity is reached.

My last moments on earth. I didn't know what to do with them. Nothing seemed appropriate. I lay quietly on my bed and read a *People* magazine. Farrah was seeing Ryan O'Neal. Some model was suing Elvis' estate for palimony. Disco was dying. A Virginian woman was selling Belgian-chocolate covered caramel apples at $12 a piece to stars, who said they had never tasted anything so wonderful.

At midnight, I heard the fireworks, but was too tired to get out of bed. I drifted into sleep, my ears ringing so loud I could barely hear the party at our neighbour's house.

In the morning, Janet and Paul were hung over. They didn't notice anything unusual. I crawled to the bathroom at the end of the hall and spent an hour vomiting thin strings of yellow bile into the toilet.

All of the next week, I wished I had died. My stomach could hold nothing down. Janet thought it was the flu and went out and got me a bottle of extra-strength Tylenol. I missed three days of school. Janet thought I needed to get out of my bedroom, so she and Paul carried me downstairs to the livingroom couch. I watched *All My Children, The Young and the Restless, Another World* and *General Hospital,* in the morning with Janet. Then she took off for her part-time job and I flipped back and forth between channels, finding it easier to watch only five minutes of a program at a time.

To this day, I can't stand the taste of gingerale.

5. WARNING: Death & Immorality

By some strange quirk of fate, Mama came for me an hour after a S.P.C.A. man took Picnic away.

Aunt Genna was weeping quietly in the upstairs bathroom when the doorbell rang. She was always telling me not to let strangers in, so when I saw the woman waiting in the hallway, I just stared at her.

"Auntie's busy," I said. "Go away."

The woman's face was smooth and pale. "Alisa," she said. "Don't you remember me, Baby?"

I backed away, shaking my head.

"Come here, Baby, let me look at you," she said, crouching down.

"You've gotten so big. You remember when I used to sing to you? Remember?"

Her eyes were brown and familiar. Her dark blonde hair was neatly highlighted by streaks that shone in the sunlight.

"Aunt Genna doesn't like me talking to strangers," I said.

Her face set in a grim expression. She stood. "Where is your Aunt?"

"She's upstairs," I said.

"Let me go talk to her. You wait right here, Baby. When I come back, maybe we'll go shopping. We can get some caramel apples. They used to be your favourite, didn't they? Would you like that?"

I nodded.

"Stay right here," the woman said as she walked by me, her blue summer dress swishing. "Right here, Baby."

Her high heels clicked neatly as she went upstairs. I sat in the hallway, on the highbacked chair that used to be Picnic's bed. It still smelled of him, salty, like seaweed.

Something thunked upstairs. I heard a slithering sound, and then the shower started. After endless minutes, the door to the bathroom creaked open. Mama's high heels clicked across the floor.

"I'm back!" Mama said cheerfully, bouncing down the stairs. "Your Aunt says I can take you shopping if you want to come. She's taking a bath." Mama leaned down and whispered, "She wants to be alone."

She had my knapsack over one shoulder. I jumped out of the chair. Mama held out her hand. I hesitated.

"Coming?" she said.

"I have to be back tonight," I said. "I'm going to Jimmy's birthday party."

"Well then," she said. "Let's go buy him a present."

She led me to her car. It was bright blue and she let me sit up front. I couldn't see over the dashboard because she made me wear a seatbelt. Aunt Genna's house shrank as we drove away. I remember wondering if we were going to get another dog now that Picnic was gone. I remember looking down at Mama's shoes and seeing little red flecks patterned across the tips, like a splatter-paint I'd done in Kindergarten. I remember Mama giving me a bad-tasting orange juice, and then I remember nothing.

6. WARNING: Death & Immorality

"Yuck," Amanda said. "I'm not touching it."

"No problem," I said. "I'll do it."

Biology 11. Amanda—black-haired, blue-eyed and busty—and I were

in the same class, looking down at the body of a dead frog. We were supposed to find its heart.

When lab partners were assigned, I was hoping for Buddy Anderson, the left guard in the school's basketball team. Instead, I got stuck with Wonder-woman. Buddy never looked at me when Amanda was near.

"Oh, God," Amanda said, as I made my first cut.

For a moment, I was by the lake, and Mama was smearing blood on my cheeks.

"Now you're a real woman," she said.

I shook my head, goosebumps prickling up my back, making my neck hairs stand on end.

"I don't know how you can do that," Amanda said.

"Well, you lift the knife and put it against the skin. Then you cut. It's very simple. Want to try?"

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Chickenshit," I said.

"Better than being a ghoul," she said.

"Just my luck to get stuck with a wimp," I muttered loud enough for her to hear as I poked around the frog's jellied innards, looking for a small purple lump.

"Very good, Lisa," Mr. Anderson said when he saw my work. "I bet you'll be a great surgeon. You have the touch."

"Thanks, Mr. Anderson," I said, blushing.

"Now Amanda," he said. "You can't let Lisa do all the work. You have to do your share."

"But I'll be sick!" she said.

The potheads at the back of the lab started to make vomiting noises, then burst out laughing.

"Here, we'll start you off on something simple," Mr. Anderson said, giving her a cow's eye.

Amanda hunched over that eyeball for a half hour. Buddy came up and stood beside her. They talked, and Buddy said something to her. She handed him the eyeball. He bounced it off the table a couple of times, then left. I went up to her and showed her my frog's heart. She glared at me, going pale.

She rolled up her sleeves fifteen minutes before lunch, gripped the scalpel in her left hand and cut, tearing a jagged hole in the yellowing eyeball.

I never noticed if she did her lab right because right then, I saw the scars on her wrists. When she noticed me staring at them, she pulled a bracelet down to cover them.

"I slipped," she said defensively. "And cut myself."

We looked at each other, both oblivious to the murmur of the class around us.

"Don't you say anything," she said.

Instead of answering, I unbuttoned the cuff of my blouse and rolled to up my arm. I turned my hand over so the palm was up.

Mr. Anderson came over so I rolled my sleeve down.

"How's it going, ladies?" he asked.

"Fine," I said.

"Yes," Amanda said. "Everything is fine now."

7. WARNING: Death and Immorality

The second time I tried to commit suicide was when I was fifteen, exactly one year after my attempt with the aspirin. This time I had done my homework. I knew exactly what I was going to do.

Determined, I bought a straight-edged razor.

I cheerfully wished Janet and Paul a happy New Year as they raced through the rain to the car, so as not to damage their rented finery.

I closed the door and listened to the house. Then I marched upstairs and put on a bikini. I ran the water, put in Sea Foam bubble bath, mango bath oil. I stepped into the bath, then lay back slowly letting the water envelop me as I watched the bathroom fill with steam.

The razor was cool in my hands, cool as a doctor's stethoscope. I put it underwater to warm it up. Flexed my arms a few times. Took several deep breaths. Shut the water off. It dripped. There was no way I could die with the tap dripping, so I fiddled with that for a few minutes.

Got out of the tub. Took a painkiller. Got back in the tub. Hands shaking. Placed the razor in the crook of my elbow. Pushed it down. It sank into my skin, the tip disappearing. I felt nothing at first. I pulled the razor towards my wrist, but half-way down my forearm, the cut began to burn. I yanked the razor away.

Blood welled in the cut. Little beads of blood. I hadn't gone very deep, a few millimeters or so. Just enough for the skin to stretch open slightly, gaping. Not enough to reach a vein or an artery.

I was shaking so hard, the bubbles in the tub were rippling. The wound felt like a super big paper cut. I clutched it, dropping the razor in the tub.

"I can do it," I said, groping for the razor.

I put the razor in the same place and pushed it deeper. A thin stream of blood slithered across my arm and dripped into the tub. It burned, it burned.

Paul and Janet came home and found me in front of the tv watching

Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life.* It always makes me cry. So there I was, bawling as Paul and Janet came through the door, and they were so drunk, they hugged me.

In two weeks the cut had healed so that all that was left was a long white line running from the inside of my elbow to my wrist like a seam.

8. WARNING: Immorality

In a tiny, grungy art gallery on the Queen Charlotte Islands, in Masset, I found the moose. Paul and Janet brought me with them to their business conference. Bored, I left the hotel and wandered down a street into this art gallery.

Nature pictures and small pieces of sad-eyed Indian children cluttered the wall. The hunchbacked owner followed me everywhere I went, not saying anything. He didn't even say, "Hi." He watched my hands like they were mutating or something. I was about to leave when I saw the moose.

"How much is that one?" I asked, reaching for it.

He grunted at me and slapped my hands away.

"How much?" I said.

When he didn't answer, I grabbed the picture and handed him twenty dollars. He pushed me out the door.

"What on earth is that?" Janet asked when I got back. She was at the mirror, putting on her pearls.

"Oh, nothing. Just a picture."

"Really? I didn't know you were interested in art. Let me see."

"It's just a tacky tourist picture. I'll show it to you later."

"Here," Janet said, taking it from my hands and unwrapping it.

"Careful!" I said.

"Yes, yes, I—" Janet's mouth fell open and she dropped the picture. "Oh my God, that's disgusting! Why on earth did you buy that! Throw it out right now!"

I caught it and hugged it to my chest. She tried to pry it from me, but I clung to it tightly. Paul came in and Janet said, "Paul, throw that disgusting thing out of here! Now!"

She made me show it to him, and he laughed. "Looks very Dali," he said.

"It's obscene."

"This from the woman who likes Pepsi in her milk."

"Paul, I'm serious," she hissed.

"Let her keep it," Paul said. "What harm can it do?"

10. WARNING: Death & Immorality

When I was twelve, I took the picture the Officer Wilkenson had given to me to a police station in Vancouver.

In the picture, Aunt Genna and Officer Wilkenson are both blurs, but there is a little brown-haired girl in the background, crouched on a white porch swing, grimacing.

They were very excited. Three days later, an important looking man in a navy blue suit came to me. His voice sounded strange; it had a flat nasal accent.

"Is this you?" the man said. He held my hand tightly in his. "Is this you, honey?"

Eyes still dazzled from the pop-pop-pop of the newspaper flashbulbs outside on the steps, I looked at the man and his face was covered with green spots.

"Yes," I said. "That's Aunt Genna. And that's Officer Wilkenson. And that's me."

"Holy smokaroonies," the man said. "We've got her."

11. WARNING: Death

There is a feeling to summer mornings that inspires poetry.

Mama loved to camp. She would wake me early, and we would sit outside and listen. My favourite place was in Banff. We were by a lake as blue-green as a turquoise. Mama made us bacon and eggs and pancakes over a small fire. Everything tasted so much better in the outdoors. I always ate more than I should have. When we were in Banff, Mama was happy. She whistled all the time, even when she was going to the bathroom. Her cheeks were apple red, and always dimpled up in a smile. We hiked for miles, seeing people only distantly.

"Imagine we're the only people on earth," she said once, smiling as she closed her eyes and opened her arms to embrace the mountains. "Oh, just imagine it."

When we left, we travelled until Mama felt the need to settle down. Then we would rent an apartment, Mama would find work, and I would go to school. I hated it. I was always behind. I never knew anybody and just as I started to make friends, Mama would decide it was time to leave. There was no arguing with her. The few times I tried, she would give me this look, this strange, distant look.

We went through the Badlands of South Dakota when I was 11, and

while I was sleeping in the back, the car hit a bump, and Mama's clipping book fell out of her packsack.

Just as I opened it to the first page, Mama slammed on the brakes, reached back and slapped me.

"Didn't I tell you never to touch that! Didn't I? Give it to me. Now, young lady, before you're in bigger trouble than you are!"

Mama used the clipping book as a fire starter that night, but it was too late. I had seen the first page, I had seen the first headlines, and I was beginning to remember.

That night I dreamed of Aunt Genna showering in blood. Mama held me until I stopped crying.

"Rock of aaa-ges, cleft for me," Mama sang softly, as she rocked me back and forth. "Let me hide myself in thee. . . "

I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep. Mama put me to bed and then climbed in beside me. I waited, afraid, for Mama to do something, to say something. As the night crawled by, I became afraid that she wouldn't and that I would wait and wait and wait and that was worse, far worse than anything Mama could ever do.

12. WARNING: Death

We never talked about it. In all the time we knew each other, Amanda and I said not one word about it.

13. WARNING: Sex, Death & Immorality

The third time I tried to commit suicide was about six weeks after Amanda started work at the *Sailor's Delight.* Paul adored her. She was never late, she never complained, and she always wore a big, bright smile.

Her mother came in once, but she didn't stay long. Dressed in a dark blue business suit her hair done up in a Princess Diana style, she stuck out from the tourists and the fishermen. When she saw Amanda, she waggled her fingers.

"Oh brother," Amanda said, still smiling.

Her mother took a corner table, and I was about to go ask for her order when Amanda gripped my arm.

"Let me do it," she said.

"But I—"

"Please."

I shrugged. "Go for it."

They talked quietly for five minutes. Other customers tried to flag Amanda's attention, but she was focused down on her mother, who was smiling, and holding Amanda's hand.

Finally, Amanda said loudly, "How nice for you. Are you going to order now?"

Her mother said something else, yanking Amanda down into the chair beside her. Amanda pulled herself back up.

"In case you didn't notice, I have a job," Amanda said. "Now, are you going to order or not?"

Her mother left soon after, and I raised an eyebrow when Amanda came back behind the counter for the coffee pot.

"Nailed the bitch," Amanda said, not bothering to explain.

Matthew picked her up sometimes after work. Paul and I had fun trying to guess what he'd dress up as. My favourite was his impersonation of Elvis. Paul liked his mermaid look. Amanda just rolled her eyes up, breathed in deeply, and expelled a loud, long-suffering sigh.

Paul kept a small automatic on the top shelf of the pantry. It was supposed to be as protection against robbers, but it wasn't loaded and I had a hard time finding ammunition for it. When he was busy with an order, I put the gun in my purse.

This time, I was going to get it right.

I remember it was a Wednesday. The sky was clear and there was no moon. I didn't want to mess up Paul and Janet's house, so I was going to do it at Look-out Point, where I could watch the waves and listen to the ocean.

I left no note. Couldn't think of anything to say, really. Nothing I could explain. Nothing to explain. There was a queer deadness to my body as I walked up the road, trying to hitch a ride. This time, this time was the last time.

Cars passed me. I didn't care. I was willing be benevolent. They didn't know. I remember thinking, how ironic, when Matthew pulled over and powered down his windows.

"Where to?"

"You going anywhere near Look-out?"

He winked at me. "I am now."

I opened the door and got in. He was surprisingly low-key for Matthew. He had on a purple muscle shirt and black studded shorts.

"Going to a party?"

"Yeah," I said. "Me and a few old friends."

Something British was on the radio. We drove, not saying anything until we came to the turn-off.

"You were supposed to turn left," I said.

Matthew said nothing.

"We're going the wrong way," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Look-out's that way."

"Yeah?"

"Matthew, quit fucking around."

"Euw. Nasty language."

"Matthew, stop the car."

"I can't heeeear you," he singsonged, putting his fingers in his ears.

"You idiot," I said, grabbing the wheel. "Pull over."

"Scared?"

"Shitting my pants. Pull over."

"You know," he said casually. "I could do anything to you out here and no one would ever know."

I let go of the wheel.

"Anything," he said.

"I think you'd better stop the car right now before we both do something we might regret later."

"Are you scared now?"

"Pull the car over, Matthew."

"Babe, call me Matt." He cranked the radio up and pressed a button. The doors locked. The sunroof closed.

"You are making a big mistake," I said.

He just grinned.

"You don't know what a big mistake you're making."

"Shitting my pants," he said.

I unbuttoned my purse. Felt around until the smooth handle of the gun slid into my palm. The deadness was gone now, and I felt electrified. I could feel every nerve in my body singing. Matthew pulled the car over in a deserted parking lot and turned to me.

"Just do what I say," he said. "And I won't hurt you."

I don't know what he saw on my face, but it made him look puzzled. He opened his mouth, but I shut him up by slowly levelling the gun at his stomach.

"You could try to slap this out of my hand, but I'd probably blow your nuts off instead of your stomach. Do you know what dum-dum bullets are, asshole?"

He blinked slowly, his eyes fixated on the barrel of the gun.

"I asked you a question, asshole."

His mouth opened and he touched his tongue with the tips of his finger. He reached slowly over to the dashboard and picked up a dog collar. I clicked off the safety. Eyes feverbright, he watched my face as he put the dog collar around his neck then attached a leash.

We didn't move. The radio played "Mr. Sandman". A semi rumbled past, throwing up dust that blew around the car like a faint fog.

"Command me," he said, offering me the leash. "I'm yours."

14. WARNING: Death

Once upon a time, a long time ago in Bended River, Manitoba, six people were reported missing:

Daniel Smenderson:	32, while going out to the nearby 7-11 for cigs
Angela Iyttenier:	18, hitchhiking
Geraldine Aksword:	89, on her way to a curling match
Joseph Rykman:	45, while on a lunch break at a construction site
Peter Brendenhaust:	56, from the St. Paul Mission Home for the Homeless
Calvin Colnier:	62, also from the St. Paul Mission.

After a thunder storm that cut off power to three different substations near Bended River, a police officer, investigating complaints of a foul smell, went to 978 West Junction Road. A little girl greeted him at the door in her nightgown. He asked if her parents were home and she said my daddy's in the basement.

"Where's your mommy?" he asked.

"A-hunting we will go," the little girl sang. "A-hunting we will go. Heigh-ho the derry-oh, a-hunting we will go."

He took her hand, but she wouldn't go down to the basement with him.

"Mama says it's bad."

"How come?"

"Daddy's down there."

As he opened the door, the reek grew stronger. He reported a tingle in the tips of his toes, a sign that always meant trouble. He asked for back up, and was refused. The other officer on the Bended River Police force was on lunch break. Covering his mouth with a handkerchief, he took a deep breath, switched the light on, but it didn't work. He went back to his car and got his flashlight, then descended.

And found nothing. The smell seemed to be coming from everywhere. Nauseated, he called out, asking if anyone was down here.

The basement had neatly tiled floors. Everything sparkled under the flashlight's beam. Faintly, beneath the overpowering reek, he could smell antiseptics, like the hospitals used. There was a thick butcher's block with a marble counter against the wall in the centre room.

"It smelled something like rotten steaks," he told friends later. "But more like the smell my wife gets when she has her period."

There were only three rooms in the basement. A bathroom, a store room, and the centre room with the marble table. After checking them all twice, he noticed that the marble counter of the chopping block had hinges on the underside. He heaved and strained but couldn't lift it. He was about to go upstairs when his toes tingled again.

There was a button on one of the butcher's block drawers. It was small and light grey. Shrugging to himself, he pressed it, thinking he had nothing to lose.

The counter top popped up an inch. He tried again and managed to slide it off. Inside the butcher's block was a freezer. It was making no sound, no humming or purring. It was dead. The smell intensified and he thought he was going to faint.

He reached down, and lifted the lid. For one moment, he thought the skinned carcasses inside the freezer were deer, or calves. Then he saw the arms and legs, neatly folded and sealed in extra-large Ziploc plastic bags and piled in the large tray that normally held ice-cubes.

Three days later, Moreen Alisa Rutford was charged with seven counts of murder. The body pieces were later identified, but this was made difficult because of the lack of heads and fingers, and Moreen's absence. Dental records for the victims could not be obtained, except for David Jonah Rutford, Moreen's husband, who was only missing his heart.

16. WARNING: Death

As one of the conditions of continued co-operation, I have made them bring me back to Aunt Genna's house.

This is the house where Picnic attacked Officer Wilkenson, I think, smiling.

The CSIS agent behind me coughs. A woman, wiping her hands on her blue apron, comes out onto the porch and smiles at us.

"Are you lost?" she says, coming down the steps. "I seen you somewhere before. I know you, don't I?"

I shake my head. I ignore her, and look at the house. In the yard, in my mind, I can see Coco, head cocked, waiting for me to throw his Bell-ball. Picnic is sitting on the porch. Jenjen is barking somewhere in the back yard.

"I know you!" the woman grows excited. "I saw you on tv—five or six years ago, right? I remember, that was when Al wanted to sell the house. You're that woman's daughter! You're the one that turned her in!"

There she is. Aunt Genna. Telling Jenjen to behave, shaking her finger at him. She is in her favourite dress, the white cotton with real French lace at the neck and cuffs and hem. She looks out of the window and waves to me.

"They caught her yet? Do you know where she is?" the woman is saying eagerly, opening the gate and advancing.

"Good afternoon," I say to the house. "How good it is to see you again."

The CSIS agent has his hand on my elbow and drags me back to the car saying something about security. All the locks and all the guns in the world won't save me from Mama, I want to tell him. You can move me anywhere and change my name to anything, but one day she'll find me.

After we drive away, I catch myself singing "Rock of Ages," touch my throat, and think of ripping out my tongue.

Fernand Roqueplan

Daru Girl

She speaks to her married sister through fogs of reason
About other worlds far beyond Tamai and Tibet, cities
Unthinkably high-rising from Tahawndam; each season
She caches silver rings and turquoise beads for taxis
She will never see but rides, breathless through her mind,
Leaving hill-jungle, hunger, goat flock, Daru blood feud.

On mornings thick with smoke and rhododendron scent
She washes clothes in the cold, swift, green Adung River.
Tall cormorants pick across the rocks, hooked necks bent
For fish. Chupa kneels into a pool, lathers her long hair
With a precious scented scrap of Burmese soap. Spring
Has opened the Irrawaddy, poisoned her heart with longing,

a yellow-throated dipper's harsh singing.

Today, the burial of her mother, Makikin: teeth, ashes, bone
Poured gently into a bamboo tube, buried above family fields
Of barley, corn and pea in a high shelf of rock, a flat stone
Scratched with her name. Chupa prays, milks the goats, yields
Enough cream and butter for the strong tea, heavy corn cake
Her father and brothers fuel the toil with. Rough hands shake
Salt across boiled spinach, beets; lying stomach-down they eat,
Staring at nothing, speaking, when at all, of the midday heat.

Rhea Tregebov

The Common Palsy

Though I should, I don't know the name,
much less the reason for the common palsy
that takes the aged, that makes the woman
ahead of me in line for this bus shake
and shake her head as if she were uttering
a constant no; no to the wait
and the air at the platform, no
to her handbag and her coat and her shoes and
no to all of it, to all that takes her
and takes us all; I who will be, am
her, who feel already in me
the no and no and no.

Kissing Back

Wendy Mai Rawlings

We are on our way to visit Vanessa. Squeezed between Melanie and Reesha in the front seat of Melanie's old Valiant, I twist my hands in my lap and whisper, "Whose idea was this?" Melanie is laughing. When we stop at a red light she turns and fixes a smile on us.

"You really look like men in those outfits! Remind me to get a picture of us," she says.

All the way to Vanessa's I am sick with worry that our gag won't go over. Whether it does depends on whether or not Vanessa actually watched the movie we took her to see at the plush Syosset Triplex, where the curtain rolls up in slow scarlet velvet waves and the screen stretches all the way to the edge of your vision. Vanessa sat on the aisle, her IV standing sentry next to her, me on her other side. Several times I glanced at her and caught the startling smooth silhouette of her skull, or allowed the slow drip of solution into a plastic tube that snaked toward her arm to mesmerize me. A bright moment on the screen illuminated two heads in front of us merged in an openmouthed kiss, and I pretended I did not notice Vanessa, slackjawed, not watching the movie at all.

The plot of this movie, I know, turned on Julie Andrews disguising herself as a man. I remember her careful straight mannish walk, her somber suits and bow ties, the tingling pleasant shock of her slender white arms when she appeared in a sleeveless dress toward the end of the movie. A yellow frock. Or maybe this was the Julie Andrews I knew in "The Sound of Music?" If Vanessa does not understand why we're wearing men's suits, I will not be the one to explain it.

Vanessa is at home with her family again, in their new house in Locust Valley. The sod for the lawn has not even been laid yet, so her house sprawls in dusty dirt, one of only ten in Oak Neck Estates. All of us—me, Melanie, Reesha—grew up in the next town over, in cottagy winterized beach houses. Thus, we walk timidly up Vanessa's broad blacktopped driveway, pausing for Melanie to snap a photo of us in front of the wrought-iron gate. She slings one arm around a statuette of a black sen-

try carrying a lantern. "Now that both of you are practically married off, I guess I'll have to pick up men all on my own," she says.

As I walk by, I rap the statuette's red and white striped cap with the heel of my hand. I hate tacky lawn decorations. I hate the pair of black lanterns with electric light shining in them, even though it is daytime. As we approach the front door Melanie pulls ahead of us, and I decide against trying to question or change her buoyant mood. It seems to me that all our trips to Vanessa this past year have been marked by Melanie's irrepressible good cheer. I cannot think of any reason for this. I decide again to let her be the liaison between us and Vanessa's stepmother, Angelina.

Angelina does not like me. The first time we met I was carving my initials and Vanessa's into a birch tree in their front yard. There was Vanessa, squatting next to me in a pink dress and matching ballet flats. We were ten and reading *Harriet the Spy* together. We read jealously—me because Harriet got to hide in dumbwaiters and write in her notebook about people she had never even spoken to; Vanessa just because Harriet was allowed to wear overalls. I carved VS + AG FRIENDS FOREVER in the birch bark with my pocket knife while Vanessa cursed Eddie Grandinetti and all boys, and we agreed that Eddie Grandinetti was a stupid name; it was like naming your kid Tommy Salami or Lizzie Gowizzy.

"And if you married him your name could be Vanessa Grandinessa!" I told her triumphantly, delighted at this name of my own invention. Vanessa bent one knee of her white tights into the dusty dirt and reached between her legs because she couldn't stop laughing, then gasped "Stop Adrian, I can't hold it in I'm gonna pee in my pants." I was laughing too and wiping my runny nose on my shirt sleeve when Angelina shot out the front door and yelled something at us in Italian. Vanessa grabbed my hand and said we had to come inside.

After that invitations to Vanessa's did not come so frequently. Angelina was suspicious of me anyway, suspicious of girls who played sports, girls with mothers who worked outside the home, girls who read too much, people who were reduced to living in beach houses year-round. She encouraged us to play board games like Life or Clue, or to help her make desserts: Jell-O layered with whipped cream in fancy parfait glasses, wobbly green or orange Jell-O molds with tiny slivers of pineapple suspended in them. When she did not hear noise from us upstairs, she found reasons to tiptoe up and spy on us. Once she marched in and snatched a copy of *Wuthering Heights* out of my hands and snapped it shut, causing me to lose my place in the book. Vanessa and I had been reading aloud to each other, the two of us pressed together beneath a reading lamp in Vanessa's father's study. "Pretty girls ruin their eyes reading too much," Angelina said, and made us follow her downstairs, where we were permitted to watch a soap opera called *Edge of Night* and eat Perugina choco-

lates wrapped in blue and silver foil. Apparently Angelina did not worry that chocolates could hurt a pretty girl's figure.

I have not seen Angelina since she found out she was pregnant. Two months ago she gave birth to a fat baby girl. I saw blurry Polaroids of the baby tacked up next to Vanessa's bed in the hospital, but Angelina and I never ran into each other at the hospital. After the baby's birth she became anemic and had to stay in bed. Often I ran into Vanessa's father pacing the halls of Sloan-Kettering, un unlit cigarette or a stale danish in his hand. One evening when Vanessa was fast asleep we slumped on stools outside her room and he confessed that he'd wanted this new baby to be a son. He'd planned to name him Walt, after Walt Disney. "Daughters," he said, tilting his head in Vanessa's direction, "are a lot of trouble."

I said I thought Walter would be a hard name for a boy to manage in school.

"Not Walter," he said. "Walt."

"I'll be sure to keep my fingers crossed for a boy," I said, and wished Vanessa would wake up.

When Angelina opens her door and finds the three of us, in mismatched men's clothes, waiting on her doorstep, her face rearranges itself from cordiality to polite distaste. She recognizes me first, with my unmistakable freckles and close-cropped hair. I am engaged now; Angelina and I have not met face to face in six months and I feel older. These past six months I have memorized the inside of a cancer hospital. I have helped Vanessa gather clumps of hair off her pillow and save it in a sealed plastic bag. I have held a kidney tray for her while she dry-heaved into it, all the time moaning something that was not quite words and not quite nonsense. In these things I have gained certain rights to Vanessa. I step forward and offer Angelina a gentleman's bow.

"We're here to see Vanessa," I say.

Angelina looks harried, her wiry black hair yanked up and tied high on her head, her eyes dark as brewed coffee and lined underneath as if with gray chalk, her lips smeared the colour of burgundy wine. Reluctantly she steps back and allows us to crowd the foyer.

"I don't know whether she's up for visitors today. . . " Angelina glances skyward, as if Vanessa, from her bedroom, might give some sign of acquiescence or refusal.

"This whole thing really only works if she sees us all together," Melanie says. "It's from that movie we saw last night—did Vanessa tell you about it?"

"She didn't tell me anything," Angelina says. "I was asleep when she came in."

I smile at her and she glares back. Years ago, when Angelina had just

married Vanessa's father, Vanessa and I came upon Angelina pressed against him in the living room, unlit except for the flames from two white candles flickering on a low table. We pressed ourselves to the wall and listened to Angelina purr in Italian, and we saw her shove Vanessa's father against the wall with a motion in her hips. He ran one hand through his thin silvery hair while she kissed him brusquely on the mouth and said "Ricardo, Ricardo." I did not realize this was Italian for "Richard," his name.

"In the middle of the night I hear her saying that," Vanessa whispered in my ear.

That night I stayed at Vanessa's and we crouched in the hallway and listened to Angelina saying "Ricardo" over and over again. We went back to our beds and whispered about Angelina as if she was a scandalous celebrity we'd seen in a restaurant: Can you believe that dress she wore? That red nail polish on those claws of hers? Whenever I pictured Angelina, she was exhaling smoke, a silver cigarette holder between two white, bejeweled fingers. It did not make any difference that in real life she wore only a thin gold wedding band, or that she always smoked her Marlboro Lights holderless. "Does she always speak with that accent?" I asked Vanessa. "Or is it an act?"

"Oh, no," Vanessa said. "It's no act. Most of her relatives don't speak a word of English."

Angelina's accent only made her more of a celebrity. More sophisticated, more scandalous. I did not realize that she was only twenty-three, a year younger than I am now. I did not know that she was closer in age to Vanessa and me than she was to Vanessa's father.

In the morning she was expansive, flitting around the kitchen in a satin bathrobe and black summer sandals. We each got half a grapefruit with half a maraschino cherry in the centre, and Angelina gave us spoons with teeth around the edges to eat them. Then buckwheat pancakes, with a thick blueberry syrup that Angelina made herself from blueberries we'd picked, boiled for hours over slow heat with lots of sugar. Vanessa and I knew this was about sex, but we only communicated our understanding through blushes and innuendo. It was several months before Vanessa got up the courage to say, "They were doing it. That's why she says his name like that."

After that we did not creep into the hall late at night and listen to Angelina anymore. We had solved the mystery, and listening after that would clearly be voyeuristic, dirty. But we resented Angelina, resented her good moods and her perfect pancakes and her sexy satin robes, and when she slapped frozen waffles in the toaster oven for us or wandered downstairs with a red cotton bathrobe belted loosely at her waist, a Marl-

boro dangling from between two fingers, we watched her exhale and sigh and sift through her unpaid bills with an unspoken, barely contained glee: Angelina hadn't been doing it.

Angelina looks at her watch and curses in Italian. "Porca madonna! Where's that nurse? We hire her just for this reason and she's never around." Then with a sweep of her hand she tells us to go upstairs, and we follow Melanie, tripping on our trousers.

Vanessa lies on a hospital cot wedged between the window and her canopy bed, which is covered with fashion magazines: *Mademoiselle,* with a picture of a woman in a plaid skating outfit gathering her bright, coppery hair into a French twist; *Cosmopolitan,* with its unabashed trademark, a woman wearing a V-neck dress that shows perfect, powdered breasts. This month her dress is ice blue. This month a single sapphire hangs as if suspended between those breasts.

"DA-DA-DA!" Melanie sings, shuffling into the room and lifting her straw hat up and down on head like a Vaudeville actor.

Vanessa smiles and lets her gaze fall slowly on each of us.

"Do you get it?" I ask immediately.

"Of course she gets it," Melanie says.

"You guys look really cute," says Vanessa.

"We brought a hat for you, too." Melanie carefully places a black chauffeur's cap on Vanessa's head. We smile at her and Reesha says "It looks good" in the same reassuring tone of voice she has always used when we ask for her opinion. Always the moderator, always the mediator, Reesha's response is always noncommittal: it's fine, it looks good. Once when Melanie drew out dour strong Irish cigarettes she'd stolen from her grandfather and offered one to each of us during a winter walk on the beach, Vanessa and I each took one and tried to smoke. While we coughed into our hands and watched Melanie for how to inhale, Reesha walked serenely at the water's edge, the glowing ash of her unsmoked cigarette falling in the water. "Thank you for the cigarette," she said to Melanie when it burned down to half its length. She dipped it daintily in the water, then wrapped it in a tissue and put in in her coat pocket.

Vanessa does not try to remove or adjust the hat. It is a relief for us all not to see her bald head—the skin high on her forehead translucent, with a few pale blue veins barely visible beneath; the vulnerable, startling bump just above where her skull joins her spine, the shock of so much brown hair gone.

Melanie starts to clear the magazines off the canopy bed so that we can lie across it and talk. "You know if you want them I have a huge stack of back issues of *Cosmo* and *Glamour.* I think for a while I even went on this

celebrity stint and started getting *People.*" She is chattering now and Vanessa does not seem to be listening; she is staring out the window at a hat blowing around the yard.

"Do you want me to bring them over?" Melanie is asking. "I also have all of Jimmy's running magazines that he just left when *he* left. I mean, I have no shortage of light reading material. If you didn't want it, I could just get rid of it, it wouldn't be a big deal."

"Someone should get that hat," Vanessa says, pointing toward a small tan wisp tumbling in the dirt.

"Oh!" Reesha says. "It's mine! You didn't get to see the whole outfit I put together."

"Maybe go out and get it." Vanessa sighs and settles back on her pillows. I watch some greenish-yellow fluid drip into a plastic bag attached to her bed and think: bile. I think of Vanessa and me at sleep-away camp, Camp Meadowlark in Maine. Her pulling the crotch of her one-piece bathing suit to the side so she could pee without taking it off, squatting over the toilet and saying "Wouldn't it be great to pee like the boys? You can just whip it out, I've seen my brother do it." Me holding the door to prevent it from swinging open while she was peeing, staring at my sunburnt nose in the bathroom mirror because I was embarrassed to look at Vanessa, embarrassed even by the sound of the stream of pee hitting the toilet water.

Now Vanessa does not pee. It drips out of her through a clear plastic tube. This is something I would like to ask her about.

Reesha leaves to get her hat. We listen to her gallop down the stairs, then watch her move out into the middle of the yard. She is shapeless in her enormous suit, her straight black hair whipping across her face as she bends for the cap. Just as she reaches for it a gust of wind sends it against a bush, and we watch her dive for it. Her dive is desperate, as all of our actions here are. We want to be in control of things, we want to move things forward, out of this sickness. This is why Melanie is making such a big deal out of the magazines; this is why Reesha is chasing a cap all over the front yard. We have tried with ice-cream and flowers, magenta or turquoise scarves, promises of trips fo California, Paris, Club Med. I have tried with novels, all my favourites, in hardcover. The trips have been couched indefinitely, the ice-cream placed on a table to melt, the flowers arranged in a vase for the windowsill, the novels stacked on top of the television. Only the scarves have served any real purpose: Vanessa has worn them for almost a year. Last night she did not. None of us has asked her why. When we met Melanie in the movie theater foyer and she saw Vanessa's bald head she nearly dropped her Coke.

I decide that I need to get out of this room for a minute. Even if it is just a minute, it will be a whole minute without having to see Vanessa's smooth skull. I excuse myself by saying that I need a glass of water.

I start down the stairs toward the landing. The house is a split-level, with a giant sitting room sort of stuck between the first and second floors. I hear the sounds of someone playing the white piano in the middle of the room. And a thin voice singing in Italian: Angelina. Her back is to me, but she hears footsteps on the stairs and turns.

"I was just coming down for some water," I say.

"There's coffee if you want it. How is she?"

"I guess she's okay. She seems pretty lucid compared to when she was in the hospital."

"I thought so, too. She seems better, I think. I tell her father I think she is better all the time." Angelina rises and walks toward me. We are almost the same height, even though Angelina wears heels.

I realize she is waiting for further confirmation from me.

"Soon, I think," Angelina says. "Richard does not sleep—at night he paces . . . but soon she will be getting better and then things will be normal here again."

"Yes," I say, "soon things will change." We go downstairs and Angelina pours me a cup of coffee. All the way up the stairs again, I hold the cup near my nose and smell the cinnamon she has sprinkled in my coffee.

When I come back into the bedroom, Melanie is telling a long story about fending off a drunk Australian in a cowboy hat at the White Horse Tavern. "Are you feeling okay, Vanessa?" she asks suddenly. "Can I get you anything?"

I perch on the bed with my hands around my coffee mug. Melanie taps out a jittery rhythm on the wooden floor. I am wondering whether she knows that she's doing it.

"You know," Vanessa says, "Angelina made all this food yesterday—these little almond cookies, and cannolis. Someone should eat them."

At this Melanie is on her feet, anxious to do something. "We could go get some . . . or we could eat them and then come back up . . ."

"Why don't you do that," Vanessa says.

I start to follow them, but when I look at Vanessa I see she is telling me to stay. "I'll be down in a minute," I say.

I sit down next to her.

"Tell me about how Darryl proposed to you," she says. "Tell me what it was like."

"It wasn't really my kind of thing at all," I say. "He took me to the Cape

and while we were having a picnic on the beach and I was freezing my ass off, this plane flew by and spelled out, 'Marry me Adrian'."

"Well? Will you?"

"Sometimes I think I won't be able to handle a white dress and being Mrs. Somebody or other, but I guess those aren't really the important things. I mean, I'm keeping my name."

"And you only have to wear the dress once."

"Right," I say to Vanessa. "That's right."

"Tell me the rest," Vanessa says. "What you did that night. How you told your family."

Now I feel shy and a little foolish. All my details—the clam shell Darryl gave me on the beach with the engagement ring wrapped in pink tissue paper and tucked inside; the bed and breakfast in Brewster where we made love in a creaky canopy bed; the strands of seaweed that caught in our hair and our underwear when we dared each other into an off-season swim in a rocky cove after breakfast—all my details seem quaint and unreal when I am staring at the neat square of gauze on Vanessa's neck. Someone gave her a tracheotomy, so she could breathe. I do not know why she couldn't. I am too afraid of Vanessa's answer even to ask.

I gaze out the window at her dog, Amos, straining on his leash, Angelina trying to pull him back onto the front walk. Amos scrabbles around in the dirt, stirring up a cloud of dust. "I don't know," I tell her. "It's hard for me to remember now. We had a nice evening. We told my family over dinner at the Mill River Inn. They like Darryl. They're glad."

"Are you glad?" She is leaning forward now, perfectly still except for the blinking of her eyes. I watch the steady drip from her IV and say, "Yes. Before I met him I wouldn't even think about getting married. Well, you already know that."

"Yes," she says.

We both watch Amos resist Angelina, leaping up only to be yanked back by the leash.

"If my father saw her treating Amos like that he'd have a fit," Vanessa says. "It's not like I can do anything about it, though."

"Yeah," I say. "That must be hard on him."

"Adrian," she says. "I want you to know I'm not doing so well."

"Yeah," I say. I set my coffee cup down on top of a magazine.

"I don't really know what that means. I just wanted to tell you."

"Okay," I say.

"I think what it means is I might die."

I look up and see the sliver of Vanessa's body outlined by the sheets. Once she had bigger breasts than I did. Once we went to Macy's together and bought Maidenform bras, an A-cup for me, a B-cup for Vanessa.

At first we thought I'd be the B and she the A, and ended up trading the ones we'd chosen by passing them under the changing room stall.

"I can't even think about that," I say.

"But you have been. You've been thinking about bridesmaids."

Neither of us says anything for a minute. Vanessa's hand rests on the metal safety bar of her cot. I put my hand over hers. We sit like that until I hear someone call my name. I get up and lean over to kiss her. As I lean close I smell antiseptic and iodine. "Kiss me," she whispers. "Kiss me like you kiss Darryl."

And so I lean and put my lips full on hers, and watch her eyes flutter and close, and I kiss her the way Darryl told me he likes it, long and full, and Vanessa kisses back and imagines this person in the hat and suit she is kissing is Eddie Grandinetti or a groom in a black tuxedo or a man she flirted with before this all began. But I am just kissing Vanessa.

Jelena Lengold
translated from the Serbo-Croate by Gordana Stevanovic

Panacea

Strange is the very word that binds us, my dear
and I will not utter it.
The other night, between your thigh and mine
lowering her head was a young woman from a French
bordello
the one who, back in the 1960's, destroyed all my chances.
Some other road,
I had, instead of you, held in my palms
the head of a cavalier who sometimes appears
when your gaze wanders off.
Something in the way I wash your laundry
suggests negligence,
something in the photograph of your youth
I find odious
and such different views on poverty
something in collecting crumbs from the table,
but I want, you see, someone who
could eat my socks
because of their smell,
and I always ask myself
what would become of this odd union
if, for example, a lion bit off my hand
if, for example, they shot in my eye,
something in the fear
with which the comb in my hair anticipates your arrival
and the cups which begin to tremble,
then once again I call the young woman from a French
bordello
to lie between us
and then it just happens:
I have the perfect body
and you are young again.

Kim Carter

The Winter Bride

Four-thirty. Wedding day.
My dress drifts over my body like a light snowfall.
But it does not blanket my anger.
My mother stands there shaking her head,
her mouth a zipper of martyred hurts.

For months we have played politics:
hurled words, like snowballs,
over organists and invitations.
Now she asks for the tenth time
why I choose to marry in the season of dead things.

Not her choice
the cold knife light of December.
Nor this logical and precise ceremony
I say I have arranged for tax purposes.

Still nattering, she hands me my veil.
I want to tell her how winter
has always eased my pain.
But I cocoon behind the icy muslin.

I conjure up my father instead.
Remember how he chopped icicles from the roof.
She said they were like knives;
but he said they were popsicles.
During the long cloaked nights
his laughter was a ribbon of cold.

He is now a memory
distant as those polar stars.

I want to tell her
I am doing this for him.
Five thirty. We walk out the door
watch the moon skate across shadows
to maim us separately. I turn to speak.
But my throat thickens and the consonants never come.

One of the Chosen

Danuta Gleed

Not much to show for eighteen years in England, Luisa's mother says, but she is smiling as she lays out clothes and shoes on the bed and tries to decide what to pack in the suitcases she'll take on the plane, and what to pack in the crate that will be sent on to Canada, where Mr. Frankland is waiting. When her mother leaves, Luisa will go to live with Basia, her mother's younger sister, Basia's husband, James, and their ten-year-old son, Andrew.

Luisa's mother used to work in Mr. Frankland's store in town until early this year, when Mr. Frankland's wife died and he decided he was homesick and returned to Canada to the place he left forty years ago when he married his English wife. Luisa's mother wrote to him. He wrote back. Now they are going to get married. Luisa did not really believe her mother would marry Mr. Frankland. Her mother is forty-one. Mr. Frankland must be a hundred. But this morning Luisa's mother said she was going to leave the furniture behind in the flat. The next occupants can use it for firewood. It was when she laughed that Luisa could tell she was definitely leaving, in five days' time, no matter what.

Luisa has not said that she doesn't want to live with her Aunt Basia and her Uncle James. She is not one to cause trouble, not any more. She has figured out something important and thinks about it a great deal. Her uncle is not really her uncle and never will be. They are not related by blood at all. If Aunt Basia hadn't married him, they may never have met him. She tried to explain all this to her mother but her mother flapped a wet dishcloth at her and told her to stop talking crazy.

Although Luisa has figured out something else now, she will keep the knowledge to herself this time. For a while, anyway. Basia and James are being very kind, her mother says, considering. And it is only for three years, after all, until Luisa finishes high school when, her mother promises, she can come to Canada, if she wants. Until then, it's better that her education not be interrupted. Besides, Mr. Frankland never had a child and would find it difficult to get used to have one around at this stage of his life. When Luisa thinks of Mr. Frankland with his white, wispy hair and the lop-sided bow tie under his chin—a different colour for each day

of the week—and the way he looked somewhere over her shoulder when he spoke to her and always called her *Laura,* she knows, that of all her mother's statements, this one is the absolute truth.

Consider yourself lucky you have such a nice place to stay, Luisa's mother tells her. Basia is preparing the large room above James' dental surgery, in the part of the house that juts out at the side. The room is twice as big as Luisa's bedroom in the flat. The ceiling is high and engraved with a pattern of leaves and twisted stems. There is a large wardrobe, a built-in bookcase and a fireplace on the wall opposite the window. Every room in the house, even the kitchen, has a fireplace. Basia says this is because the house was built seventy-three years ago, in 1890, in the time of Queen Victoria, and this was then the only way of heating such a large place.

Luisa will fill no more than one shelf in the new bedroom with her books, and probably less than half the wardrobe with her clothes. She is also taking the navy blue shoebox with *Clark's* written in white along each side, in which she has packed her missal, thirty-seven holy pictures, a packet of razor blades wrapped in a shiny gold chocolate wrapper, her black wooden rosary beads and the white plastic cross which is about three inches tall and has the words, *At the Blessed Grotto I have prayed for you,* printed on the front. Sister Margaret brought two dozen such crosses back from Lourdes last summer and gave one to each of the girls in her Religion class. When the other girls weren't looking, Sister pressed a small round medal of the Virgin Mary on a thin blue ribbon into Luisa's palm. Luisa wears it each day around her neck, under her clothes. Sometimes, Sister lends her books about the saints: St. Maria Goretti, St. Joan of Arc, St. Winefride, all young women—girls, really—and each one of them a martyr.

Luisa knows that Sister Margaret has noticed there is something different about her because she has talked privately to her about vocations. Sister has explained that the word *vocation* comes from *vocare,* a Latin word that means *to call.* To be given a vocation means to be called, to be singled out by God for something special. She herself heard the call to the religious life at a young age, at fifteen or so, the age Luisa is now.

"Do you think you have heard God call you?" Sister has asked her.

Luisa thought for only a moment. Then she nodded. *Luisa, Luisa* she has heard, lately. She was not surprised when she realized that this was the voice of God or, perhaps, one of his angels. Now she understands that God has been preparing her for something for a long time, for as long as she can remember.

Luisa keeps her shoebox hidden under her bed. Her mother does not yet know that her own daughter is one of the chosen. Yesterday, when

Luisa returned to the flat after the six o'clock Mass at St. Alban's, her mother, who does not usually get up until noon when she is not working, was standing by the window in her black nylon nightdress, a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

She stubbed out her cigarette in the plant pot with the crooked old cactus and frowned. "That Sister Margaret and those Sisters Mary whatever-their-names sure as hell give you some strange ideas," she said.

Luisa didn't answer. She was not quite sure which strange ideas in particular her mother meant. Is it that she now says the Rosary each night before bed? Is it her lack of interest in the Saturday night dances at the Polish Club? Does the way she wears her hair—in one braid hanging down her back—offend her mother somehow? Her mother is always suggesting that she have it cut and styled. Don't you have any pride in your appearance? she asks.

Luisa has more important concerns now that she knows things that most people, including her mother, don't know. The things she knows are not ordinary things, such as how many rivers there are in England or what year Mr. Macmillan became Prime Minister, or how the African elephant differs from the Indian. She can never remember about the elephant, anyway. The African one has ears as broad as palm leaves, the Indian has small ones, like a dog. Or is it the other way round? It doesn't matter. Nothing in this world matters, now that she has been invited into the real world, the world of the spirit.

Sometimes, when she kneels in the school chapel, the angels make her smile with the stir of their wings. Their voices are soft and urgent. She has heard demons, too, not in chapel but in her room at the flat. *Liar, liar,* they hiss. *Bitch. Whore. Filth.* Their voices are harsh, like balloons suddenly losing air. But they cannot frighten her. She knows they are sent to test her. She makes the Sign of the Cross and orders them to leave. Once she forgot herself and shouted out loud. She covered her ears with her hands and yelled, "Go away! Leave me alone! Leave me alone!" and her mother flung the door open and snapped, "Luisa, for heaven's sake. Have you gone mad? Who are you screaming at?"

Luisa remembers the exact moment she received the sign that indicated she is one of the chosen. It was one year ago, at the Requiem Mass for her father's funeral. She remembers sitting in the pew, staring somewhere above the priest's head when a sudden burst of light lit up the stained glass windows into pieces of colour as brilliant as jewels. But she knew it was raining. She could hear the rattle of raindrops on the porch roof. The light could not have come from the sun. She looked around but

all heads were bent. No one else had noticed the colours and she knows now it was a sign, a message meant especially for her.

Everyone said later that she was very brave because she didn't cry at all that day. She found it hard not to smile, in fact, and scandalize everyone. Her father, who had gone to the White Swan last Sunday afternoon and never returned, was right there, beside her, and she could talk to him in her head. And when the pallbearers picked up the coffin to carry it from the church, she could hear angels and demons whispering and shifting around. Some of the demons were in disguise. Demons are notorious for their attempts to pass as human beings. They can steal more souls this way.

One of the six pallbearers was Uncle James. He didn't look much different from the other men in his white shirt and dark suit and tie. He was a little taller than the others, perhaps, and he held his chin higher. His back was stiffer because he is, as Luisa's mother is always saying, an Englishman, a dentist, a professional, a respected member of our community. Luisa stared at him as he walked by. He didn't fool her for an instant.

Luisa knows that it will not do to talk about this other world to those who have not been invited to be part of it. They will only turn their faces away and smile behind their hands. They will only tell her that she has strange ideas, the way her mother does.

You'd think her mother, whose older sister is a saint in heaven, would know better. You'd think being the sister of a saint would make her pause and think a little. You'd think it would make her wonder. Luisa bites down on her lip when she remembers the way her mother's face creased and her shoulders shook as if she was trying not to laugh when Luisa asked for black rosary beads, like a nun's, for her birthday last May. Or when she hung a picture of St. Michael the Archangel wielding a sword in the devil's face over her bed. Lack of understanding is a cross she knows all the chosen must bear and she has taken to praying each day to her mother's sister, the saint, for guidance.

Her mother's sister is in the small yellowed photograph that hangs in a silver frame on the living room wall. Basia, the baby, is also in the photo, in the centre. Marysia, Luisa's mother, is also there, on the left, and the oldest sister, the saint, whom the young Luisa is named after, is on the right. The photograph was taken in front of the family home on the farm in Eastern Poland, the year the war began, not long before the Russian soldiers arrived and packed off the whole family to a labour camp in Siberia. *Siostry—Marysia, Basia, i Luisa, w 1939 roku,* someone has written in black ink on the bottom margin. There is a crease in the centre, straight through a small Basia's face and her pale curls, but you can still tell that she is easily the prettiest of the three. Marysia is a tall girl with

skinny bird-legs and a thick dark braid over each shoulder. The Luisa in the photograph is short, with a wide, pale face. She is squinting, or frowning, into the camera. She is holding a cloth in her hand, probably an apron because there are strings hanging from it down to the ground.

Good old Luisa, the young Luisa's mother always says of her older sister. She is a saint in heaven. When their parents were sick with typhoid in the labour camp in Sibera she kept Basia and Marysia away to protect them and cared for their parents herself. She was already infected when they died and died herself, soon after.

Luisa removes the photograph from the wall. She tears the front page of yesterday's *Daily Express. Japan struck by disaster: three-train pile-up kills 164; mine blast kills 327, injures 348,* the headline reads. She wraps the photograph in the paper and takes it into her room to put in the shoebox. The three sisters have always interested her. She thinks there must be clues in their young faces to explain each one of their lives, clues to show how and why each one got from *there* to *here.* Each of their faces is a kind of map, if only she knew how to read it.

There is pretty little Basia. Luisa's mother insists that you could tell even then that a man who can afford a big house and many other things besides, would claim her. When she and Basia arrived in England after the war, she had to take whatever work she could. She was twenty-one. Basia was fourteen and was sent to a foster family and to school. Five years later she was a secretary to James. Soon after, she married him. Marysia has not been as lucky as her younger sister. She married a man she met one night in the Polish Club. She was taken with his promises and his smile, and the way he sang into her ear as they danced. It didn't seem to matter then that he didn't have a decent job. That's always the way. The pretty one has all the luck.

As for Luisa, you could tell she was meant to be a saint, even when she was very young. She was always the quiet one, the dreamer. Her mind was always somewhere else.

The young Luisa has lately taken to inspecting the face of the Luisa in the photograph very carefully. She has noticed something that she never noticed before. The face in the photograph is pale and broad with straight dark eyebrows like her own, the hair is neither black nor blonde but somewhere in between. Muddy-brown is the way Luisa's mother describes her daughter's hair, and this certainly is the colour that would best describe the hair of the other Luisa, the saint. The two Luisas look exactly alike. They could be twins.

This is a mysterious thing. A miracle. It's a wonder no one has ever commented on the resemblance. It's a wonder Luisa's mother has never said, "Good heavens, Luisa. You are just like my sister."

"What do you think?" Luisa's mother calls out. Luisa walks into the bedroom and stands by the window. Her mother holds up a navy woollen jacket with a tartan lining. Her fingernails are smooth and scarlet as petals. She has recently had her dark hair cut in a pageboy style and when she moves her head quickly the sides brush her cheeks. "Shall I take this with me, or send it in the crate? I may not need it for a while. I have my heavy coat." She folds the jacket without waiting for an answer.

Luisa stares out of the window at buildings trapped in the November fog. The fog parts for a moment to reveal a tall factory chimney and closes up again quickly, tight as a fist. Luisa thinks of November in Canada. All she knows of Canada is the sprawling shape she has seen on a map, something like the drawing of an amoeba in her science book, and that there is a lot of snow, and fir trees and mountains. For several months letters stamped with Canadian stamps and blue Air Mail stickers have dropped through the mail slot in the front door of the flat. Luisa's mother kept the letters in her top dresser drawer. She was working in the *Ladies Sweaters* section in Littlewood's at the time and constantly complained about having to re-fold the sweaters after customers had pulled them out. She had to wear a pastel pink polyester dress with white piping around the collar and cuffs and the customers were not quite as *nice,* not quite the same class as the ones who once shopped in Frankland's Fine Foods.

Luisa read Mr. Frankland's letters when she returned from school, while she waited for her mother to come back from work. *Very hot and humid this week,* she read. *I forgot how bad it could be. I have bought a small house on the waterfront. Very pleasant. My life is very quiet now.* It was all the same until the end of August when she read, *Please do me the honour of becoming my wife.*

We will be living in Kingston, Luisa's mother said when she told her she had accepted Mr. Frankland's proposal. Kingston is a couple of hours drive away from Ottawa, she added, as if this explained everything.

Luisa makes a steam patch on the window with her breath. The patch is as big as her face. She scribbles it out with one finger. The glass squeaks. She turns around.

"Maybe I can visit you at Christmas," she says. "I get three weeks off school."

She knows what her mother will say, but she wants to hear her say it, anyway. It will not upset her. Once she was full of cracks, like an old vase that was ready to fall apart at a tremor, and shatter on the floor.

It is different now. Nothing anyone can say or do can unglue her.

"Christmas," her mother replies with a small sigh. "That's five, six weeks away. I'll have been married only a few weeks then." Her neck is

pink. The pink spreads upwards, over her cheeks. "Summer," she smiles. "Summer's a good time. The weather is nice in Canada in summer." She lifts out a dress from the suitcase and re-folds it. "Remember," she turns to Luisa, "Be good when I'm gone. Don't give Basia and James any trouble."

On a warm Saturday afternoon in July when Luisa was five years old, she was walking with her mother from the bus stop towards the large Victorian house where James and Basia lived. Luisa was wearing the pink dress with puff sleeves and a lace ruffle around the hem which her aunt and uncle had given her for her birthday. They were going to tea. Luisa was also going to have her teeth checked. Her father was to meet them there. He often worked for James and Basia on the weekend when he couldn't get overtime at the factory. He would fix a leaky tap, put up wallpaper, replace a cracked window. Thank God for the extra money, Luisa's mother would say.

That day he was fixing loose boards on the coalshed roof. Luisa and her mother could hear the bang bang of his hammer as they walked up to the gate. Basia was carrying a tray and called out a greeting. She was wearing a flowered yellow dress Luisa had never seen before and her pale hair hung in curls to her shoulders like a girl's.

There was a table under the oak tree, covered with a white cloth. James was sitting in the sun, one leg crossed over the other, reading a newspaper. He folded the newspaper in four and dropped it on the grass as Luisa and her mother walked up.

"Luisa," he said as he rose. "Come to the surgery with me now while we're waiting for your father to finish. He won't be long." He took her hand and led her towards the side door.

He lifted her into the chair and raised it high. He removed his white coat from the hook on the back of the door and slipped it on. Open wide, he said, and rummaged about in her mouth with an instrument that looked like one of her mother's crochet hooks.

"All right." He removed the instrument and placed it on a tray.

She was waiting for him to lower the seat when he lifted her dress and slid his hand along her thighs. He pulled the elastic of her panties aside. His rough finger probed her warm flesh. "Be a good girl," he whispered. His face was so close she could smell the sour smell of the pinpricks of sweat on his nose and forehead.

She began to cry. The window was open and a warm breeze brought with it the sound of Basia's and her parents' voices.

"Be a good girl," her uncle said again as he pinned her to the chair with his free hand.

She cried louder. There was a sound of heavy footsteps and a quick, loud knock. As the door flew open Luisa's uncle withdrew his hand quickly and hoisted her up under the armpits to deposit her on the floor.

Her father was standing in the doorway. "Luisa. Luisa. Such a noise. What is the matter?"

James shrugged. "She has two, three small cavities. She doesn't want me to do them now. I'll do them later, one by one. I'll make sure they're finished before she starts school in September." He reached into a drawer and pulled out an orange lollipop. He held it in front of Luisa like a round, bright sun. "Here," he said. "You were a good girl."

"Well." Luisa's father was still breathing hard as if he had run very fast. There were stains on the knees of his work pants and a long smear of dirt across one cheek. Luisa held the lollipop tightly to her chest. James was picking up long silver instruments from a tray and depositing them with a clink, one by one, into a drawer. His fingers were long and pale and he wore a gold ring with a small red stone on the smallest finger of his right hand.

Luisa's father picked her up. "Well," he said again and turned towards the door. "Say thank you."

That evening, Luisa's mother knelt on the bathroom floor to run Luisa's bath. Luisa was standing naked, waiting, when she suddenly clamped her hand between her thighs and said, "I didn't like it when Uncle James put his hand here."

"Luisa." Her mother turned the taps off sharply. She gripped Luisa's shoulders hard. There was silence. Water gurgled in the pipes somewhere. "Don't tell stories. Don't ever say anything like that again. That's very, very naughty."

When Luisa had to go to her uncle's surgery later, a new friend came with her and squeezed into the chair beside her. The friend's name was Lila. Lila's skin was pale and her hair was almost white. Although she was as tall as Luisa, wore the same clothes and her long hair was caught up in a similar pair of thin braids that hung to her waist, no one except Luisa could see her.

Lila slept beside Luisa at night. She sat at the table at mealtimes. Luisa screamed if her mother or father sat on her friend accidentally. Her mother grumbled. Her father laughed. Let the child be, he said. Too much imagination for her own good, her mother muttered. One day it will get her into trouble.

When Luisa started school in September, Lila came along. Infants 1 classroom was a big room with five low round tables. Each table had six plastic blue chairs. There was a playhouse as tall as an adult in the corner

of the room, with two windows and a proper door that opened and closed. The playhouse, Sister Anna explained as the children lined up at the door, was only for the children who were good.

When Sister gave the signal to sit, Luisa sat down in one of the chairs, turned and placed her hands flat on the chair beside her. When Sister came to investigate, Luisa said she was saving the seat for her friend, Lila. Lila was over there, inspecting the playhouse. She would be right over. Lila came everywhere with her, even to the dentist's, where she sat beside Luisa and allowed Uncle James to lift up her skirt and put his fingers inside her panties and inside the soft, dark places. She never cried, even when he hurt her, even when he scratched her thigh with his gold ring and a drop of blood, round and red as a Smartie, settled on her yellow skirt. And Lila always let Luisa keep the sweets that Uncle James gave afterwards, even the special ones like a crinkly packet of Licorice Allsorts or a stick of Toblerone, her favourite.

Luisa didn't tell Sister Anna all this. She just kept her hands flat on the seat and said, "Lila wants to sit here. Lila is my very best friend."

Sister removed Luisa's hands from the seat. She called her a liar, a wicked girl for making up stories. When liars die, they go to hell. "Imagine the smell of your body burning," Sister said. "Imagine this pain for ever and ever."

"Have you decided what you want to take with you?" Luisa's mother asks.

"Yes. I can get everything in the big suitcase."

"You want these?" She indicates the stack of paperbacks on the dresser that she reads in bed each night. Luisa knows each of these books has a bright cover of some young woman swooning into the arms of a tall young man. The woman has long, wavy hair—red or blonde or black—and always wears a tight dress that shows the outline of full, round breasts. The young man is fair or dark but his arms are always muscular.

"No," she says. "I don't want them."

"Right, then." Her mother reaches for her packet of Woodbines. "I don't know what I'll do if you misbehave," she says. She strikes a match and holds it up to her cigarette. "You won't spoil it for me, will you?"

Luisa shakes her head.

She knows her mother is thinking of other times, when she was younger.

The time she cried when she had her teeth checked.

The time James said she could keep the rabbit a child at school had given her in his garden shed, because pets were not allowed at the flat.

The rabbit was black with two white spots on its back. Luisa called her Susie. Uncle James bought a cage from the pet shop. Aunt Basia gave her a bag of carrots and lettuce.

Luisa took an extra bus from school every day for two weeks to visit Susie. She filled the cage with crumpled paper, grass clippings and twigs because the days were getting cold. She took Susie out of the cage when she visited and walked around the garden, holding her close, stroking her long ears. Sometimes she noticed James in the surgery window, watching.

One afternoon the door of the cage was open. The cage was empty. Luisa ran around the garden, calling, "Susie, Susie." Frost had stiffened the blades of grass into whiteness. The chill air cut through her coat, wrapped itself around her legs. She thought of dogs and cats, of a frozen furry body under a bush. "Susie, Susie," she yelled. The words caught in her throat.

Uncle James was blocking her path. "Lost Susie, have you? Did you forget to close the cage, then?" He smiled. "Over here." He took her wrist and led her behind the coalshed. He pressed himself against her. "Stand still," he said. Luisa wriggled away and ran.

"He let Susie out on purpose," she screamed at the flat. "He did. He did. I know he did." She stamped her feet.

Her mother slapped her hard across the face. "Control yourself," she cried. "You're nothing but a troublemaker, you are."

Then there was the time Luisa's watch disappeared when they were visiting James and Basia. The watch had a thin leather strap and a square, flat face and had been a Christmas gift from them only three weeks before. As they sat down to tea, James pulled the watch from his pocket.

"Luisa," he said softly. He held the watch by the end of the strap and swung it from side to side. The face was squashed flat. The hands were missing and the glass was shattered. "I found this in the hall." He paused. "Luisa, why did you do such a thing?"

Everyone was looking at her. Luisa imagined removing the watch from her wrist, throwing it on the floor and stepping on it hard. She imagined and imagined until the imaged flickered in her mind, together with the image of the watch lying on a bathroom shelf where she had placed it before washing her hands. Other pictures flashed and shimmered before her. Her uncle's hands on her bare breasts. The smell of his warm breath. Peppermints. *Behave yourself. Behave.* Hands grab her clothes in the dark hall, push her into the empty room above the surgery. Another hand (hers?) lashes out, fingers curved, claw-like. An intake of breath. *Bitch.* Three red lines on the back of his hand. Sound of a slap. Her cheek stings. Her head slams against the wall.

Too much imagination will get you into trouble one day.

"Well, Luisa?" Basia's cheeks were pink.

The curtains were drawn. There was a crackle and hiss from the fireplace. The room glowed golden. Luisa ran her forefinger around the silver rim of her plate. There were small yellow flowers, each one no bigger than the eye of a mouse, just inside the rim. She had taken a cherry tart. It sat in the centre of her plate.

"Luisa. Luisa," her mother was shaking her arm. "Basia is speaking to you."

"I didn't," she said. "I don't know." The cherries in the tart looked like bumps pushing up under a red skin. "I didn't."

"Then who did?" James laughed. "Fairies? Goblins? One of your make-believe friends?" He touched her shoulder lightly. "You're not saying *I* did it, are you?" He was smiling.

"Apologize." Her mother gripped Luisa's arm. She turned to her husband. "I am so ashamed."

Luisa's parents wouldn't allow James to drive them home. I'm so ashamed, Luisa's mother kept saying as they grabbed their coats. My own daughter. So ungrateful. I'm so ashamed. They sat on the bus in silence. Luisa's mother sat in front, her back rigid. Luisa sat in the seat behind with her father.

"Luisa," he said. "What is going on with you?" His face was yellowed in the sickly light. His eyes were tired. There were hollows in his cheeks she had never noticed before. She tried to say something but no words would come. "James has bought you so many nice things," her father added. "Clothes, a watch, books. Things I could never afford."

"You'll help Basia with the house and with Andrew?" her mother is saying.

"Yes."

Her mother sighs. "They've been very kind. James insisted they'll be happy to have you. Basia says you've been much better lately. You'll be good, won't you?"

"Yes. Of course, I'll be good."

And she will be, now she understands things she never understood before. Everything is happening according to plan. Her father has gone. Her mother is definitely leaving. She will soon face the test for which she has been preparing all the fifteen years of her life.

During Lent and Advent the Sisters talk about discipline, about *mortifying the flesh,* to prepare for The Coming. The girls in school give up sugar in their tea. They go to daily Mass. They give up films or kissing their boyfriends. They chatter incessantly about how much they are suffering. They groan and sigh.

But the chosen must discipline themselves constantly, in extra, special

ways. Nuns have thin leather straps with sharp studs on the ends with which they whip themselves. Luisa has read about this in books. The nun strips to the waist, kneels on the floor of her cell and lashes her own back five or ten times. More, if she needs to. Luisa doesn't have a strap like that but she has found other ways. She cuts the insides of her arms with the small vegetable knife. She tries to be neat about it by making the cuts exactly two inches apart and one inch long all the way up to her elbows. She doesn't go very deep, just deep enough for the blood to burst through. When she sees the small, shiny red beads she becomes buoyant, weightless, as if she is about to float away. She used to cut her legs, too, but she won't any more because other people saw the marks during gym. One girl asked her what they were from and Luisa didn't have an answer. She wears her gym sweater now during gym to cover her arms. No one should see these marks. Discipline must be private.

"Here, get some papers and I'll pad the spaces in the crate."

Luisa gets the stack of old papers from the living room. She sinks to her knees and helps her mother tear the pages, crumple them, stuff them between bulky packages in the large square crate in the middle of the floor. *Yugoslav earthquake claims 1,000 lives,* she reads as she packs. *Churchill retires after long career. President Kennedy visits Berlin Wall. Soviet Union puts first woman in space.* She smiles. She is thinking of ants. Scurrying, scurrying.

There's a picture of the Soviet woman above the article. She is wearing a bulky suit and a helmet like a motorbike rider. She is lying back with her eyes closed. There is a piece of equipment like something a scuba diver might use in her mouth. The words, *Valentina Tereshkova in training,* are written beneath the picture. *Chalk up another first,* the article says, *for the Soviets in outer space. Junior Lieutenant Valentina Tereshkova has become the first woman to blast off and circle the globe. She comes back today after her Vostok VI capsule made 48 revolutions in just under three days.*

Luisa thinks of this woman trapped in her tiny capsule, tumbling round and round. How does it feel, she wonders, to be so high, higher than anyone else, above the clouds, close to the stars and the moon? Was this Valentina Tereshkova afraid? Was she? Luisa doesn't think so. She thinks the woman wished she could stay up there for ever and ever. She is sure of it.

"Luisa, stop daydreaming or we'll never be ready."

"Look." Luisa holds the paper in front of her mother. "The Russians have sent a woman into space."

"Russians." Her mother snorts. "Don't talk to me about Russians. Space. Siberia. It's all the same to me." She stands up. "Well, that's that.

In five days I'll be in Canada. I'll write to Basia right away to see how things are going."

"Don't worry. I'll be good. You'll see." Luisa's voice is strong and very firm.

"Luisa. Luisa," her father said to her one Sunday after lunch. It was one year ago. She had taken out her school books and was sitting at the table. Her mother was clattering about in the kitchen. Her aunt Basia had complained to her mother that morning after Mass about the previous night when Luisa was babysitting Andrew while she, Basia, was at choir practise. James had been to a conference and arrived home earlier than expected. Andrew was in bed. Luisa was doing her homework. Her uncle appeared in the doorway and said, "So." Luisa raised her wooden pencil case and threw it as hard as she could.

"Luisa, James has a gash on his forehead," her mother said as they walked home. "He said he found you opening the liquor cabinet and when he told you off you threw something. I could hardly believe my ears. How could you? I am so ashamed. Basia is very upset."

"Don't be ridiculous, Marysia," her father snapped. He marched ahead with his hands deep in his pockets.

"Me? Ridiculous? That girl is crazy," Luisa's mother shouted as soon as they arrived in the flat. "Do you hear me? Crazy. Breaks things, throws things. Lies all the time. Remember those scratches on his hand? She's always been crazy. She should be locked up." She marched into the kitchen and kicked the door shut behind her.

"Luisa, what is going on?" her father asked. He moved a pile of schoolbooks aside.

"Nothing," Luisa replied. She was scribbling circles, round and round on the back of an exercise book and suddenly her pencil was making words without her being able to stop it. *Help help help help,* she wrote. She covered the words with her arm.

"Luisa?" her father placed his hand on hers.

There was silence. She thought about herself sitting at the table next to her father. She was one person in the whole universe. A speck. She could fade just as easily as Lila had faded one day. One minute Lila was walking home from school with her, as she had every schoolday for years, next minute she had disappeared. Now Luisa remembered what made Lila disappear so suddenly. You're bad, Luisa said to her. You're wicked, she shouted. You let him. Lots of times. Even when you could have stopped him, you let him. You will burn in the fires of hell.

She lowered her head over her books.

"Nothing," she whispered. "Nothing."

Her father rose. She heard the front door open and close.

"He must be at the White Swan," her mother said hours later. "Go fetch him. He promised to fix the pipe under the sink this afternoon."

A weak sun struggled through a layer of cloud and grazed her head as she walked. Shiny puddles dotted the road. The street was quiet. A bus roared by and disappeared over the hill. A small green van appeared around the corner and picked up speed. A man came out of the dark double doors of the White Swan. His hands were in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. He stepped off the curb. There was a screech of brakes and the man flew high in the air like a heavy sack. His limbs dangled. There was a thud and silence.

Luisa knew before she got to him that this was her father. There was no blood. He was lying still on the side of the road, one arm under his head, as if he had decided to take a nap.

Luisa will help with the housework at her aunt's and uncle's house and she will keep her own room very clean and neat and bare as the nun's cell she saw the other day. She sneaked into the private part of the convent with three other girls after school when the nuns were in chapel. The girls had been reading *I Leap Over the Wall* and *The Nun's Story* and wanted to know if nuns wore bras and if it was true that they wore long, loose gowns when they bathed so they could not see their own naked bodies.

The cell was small and square with a tidy bed, a prie-dieu, a closet, and a crucifix on the wall. Christ on the cross to ward off evil spirits. The girls crowded in the doorway. They did not dare step inside and look in the closet where the answers to their questions might be.

"Nothing," one of the girls whispered. "It's boring."

Nothing, the others agreed, disgusted. They padded away.

Luisa, Luisa, someone called. Luisa left the group and walked back to the cell. *Here. Over here.* She stared inside. "Where?" she said out loud. "Where?"

"Are you crazy?" A girl grabbed her arm. "Talking to yourself. Come on. We'll get caught."

Luisa watches the nuns carefully these days. She imitates the way they fold their hands in prayer. She whispers the *Angelus* with them when the bell clangs at noon. Nuns have only one foot left in the door of this world. Maybe not even a foot. Perhaps only a toe or two. Their faces are turned in the other direction. No wonder they are calm, and move as silently as moons navigating the planets.

Now that Luisa is also standing at this door, she prays every day that God will soon give her the signal to step inside. The other day when she

was clearing out the bathroom she found an unopened packet of her father's razors beneath the sink. She opened the packet and pulled out one razor and made three small nicks inside each arm. The razors are better than the vegetable knife. The knife is blunt and she has to cut the same place more than once sometimes and when she forgets to return it to the kitchen her mother starts opening drawer after drawer and accuses her of being untidy. The nicks that she made with the razor were not very deep, just deep enough for the blood to gush through in small scarlet spurts, like half a dozen tiny mouths opening. She inspected the wavery blue veins on the insides of her wrists. They are as thin and pale as threads. She wrapped the packet of razor blades in the gold chocolate wrapper and slipped it into her shoebox for later.

Luisa stares in the mirror over her mother's dresser. She moves her head this way and that.

"Do you think that I look like Luisa, your sister?" she asks.

"For heaven's sake." Her mother stubs out her cigarette in the ash tray. "How am I supposed to remember what she looked like? She's been dead twenty-one years. What brought this on?"

"Oh, nothing, really."

What do saints look like, anyway? she wonders. In the photograph, Luisa looks quite ordinary. A saint, a martyr, could be a someone you pass on the street, an old man or woman, a mother or father, or the girl in a photograph who has been called out in the middle of washing the dishes and is still holding on to her apron. A saint looks the same as anyone else, until she faces the final test.

St. Joan of Arc praised God even as she was burning at the stake.

St. Winefride called God's name as she was beheaded and a fountain sprang up on the exact spot her head touched as it fell to the ground.

"Here." Here mother lifts up Luisa's braid. "If you cut your hair short, just below the ears and backcomb it on top you'll look really nice."

Luisa stands still and allows her mother to undo her braid, to fluff up the hair on top of her head.

"Luisa? What do you think?"

Luisa is smiling into the mirror. Her features shift and return into focus. *Open your heart and mind to do the Lord's bidding,* Sister Margaret says. Luisa is ready. Soon she will face her test. Her heart flutters in her chest like a startled bird.

J. Michael Yates

two poems

Sapsucker

All night I lay not listening to the cougar calling through the black rain and mist white in the puncturing light.

The sound fell into the seam between a child crying out in the night and the mew of a small bird of charcoal and crimson.

The auditory cougar occupied my silence as ferns occupy the fragile space between strong trees—not sun-spokes, variegated green and all the fall of shadow into blinding black. Not that, but that inexactly.

Lupin and foxglove and skunk-cabbage were part of the cougarnight, but not part of my not listening.

The child life of the cougar cry gives me disquiet but not panic nor knowledge. I speak more to the small black and red bird with the unpleasant name.

I have come to contain this mountain, the mist-space it creates surrounding.

Each day spring breaks again, each day a little higher, as the skirts of snow rise.

Tonight in the rainy cougar, all seasons interwoven on this mountain and contained.

Tonight I am alone in this place.

Only what I say of this remains.

Chickadee

When as few as two are gathered in a small place of refuge from weather or pursuit, always there is one who is giving up so perfectly that he seems to notice and appreciate even the smallest labour or touch which has occurred since he was last here.

The I Ching of Shoes

Darleen Quaife

EARTH

He knows about the old woman in the kitchen with her bag of special dirt. Not that he's really seen either the woman or the bag, just glimpses through the swinging doors as he sits over his daily bowl of sweet and sour soup. The Dragon is handy, right next to his shoe store. Already he's become a fixture; they speak their English openly in front of him now, but not often. Since his ears don't work on the Chinese tongue, his eyes are there to record the men and women who go back among the knives and vegetables to consult the old woman. But of course he knows better than to use the barefaced western stare in this place. At any rate, he's not real good at eye contact no matter where he is. A habit his father still points out as unmanly. There is no need for eye contact in his business, no need to look above the ankle, and extremely dangerous to raise the eyes to the level of a knee. "Salesmanship," his father's favourite word. "Gotta look'm in the eye if you wanna sell." His father is or rather was Farmer Brown Used Cars. Farmer Brown doesn't understand shoes. You don't have to see at all to sell shoes, not really. You listen: *something fancy make my foot look smaller nice high heel you know for the calves functional killers crushing my little toe sturdy flat sensible stiletto red satin Oxford Buster Brown for a wedding no shit-kickers too bad pointed toes Italian geeze fairy boots bunions God should have such feet used to bind them you know black for a funeral nothing expensive you understand his good shoes can go to his brother's boy lots of wear left do you bronze baby shoes said I'd ask.* Then he steps through the curtain into the back, the dim world of shoe boxes. He stands quiet, eyes closed remembering every word of the request. The words break apart, syllables spin down through his body like gyres of electricity. He wears rubber soled shoes. Grounded, he is charged with his mission, his hands reach for the shelves guided not by his eyes, but by a sixth sense, by instinct... call it what you will. It's enough that he doesn't read the labels on the boxes, doesn't look to size or colour for his answer, no, he simply runs his fingers over the bar codes—divining.

Known as Mr. Shoe or Buster Brown, he's never wrong. Never a pair of shoes returned, never a complaint of a bad fit: feet or ego. Of course, he understands better than most people that the psyche resides in the feet not the head. Which means we are truly divided, separate and opposite clay vessels for emotion and thought, impulse and reason, spirit and profanity. Mr. Shoe knows what kind of business he's in. The sign in his window reads: COME IN AND HAVE A FIT.

☰ HEAVEN

She's got it down pat. She can Step Back And Repulse The Monkey on both the right and the left. But she proved back there in the restaurant that she's not very good at Stork Cools Wings. This is what she thinks. This is what she thinks as she crosses the street and walks toward her Tai Chi class in the upstairs rooms of the old Martin Building. Definitely not cool to mutter about being late for an appointment, grab her gym bag and head for the door during the testimonials for the bride-to-be. Her friend. A stranger when surrounded by women so polished they reflect each other's perfection.

As she changes into her sweat suit, she notices how the material has worn thin between her legs. It's like gauze, she sticks her finger through to the flesh of her thigh. No matter, she's not ashamed here among those aspiring to Ride The Tiger. It isn't her clothes that need to be perfect, it's her resolve. She's working toward the 108th Move, the conclusion to Tai Chi, expecting to be disciplined, strong and flexible enough to execute a 109th Move she has dreamed up. It is her invention. She calls it: With Little Toe In Mouth, Blow.

Her shoes are worn too. Actually, that's where her idea for a 109th Move came from: her little toe breaking through the fabric of her black Chinese slipper. One day as she cast her eyes downward seeking the Needle At The Sea Bottom, Move 28, she witnessed at that very moment the tip of her little toe pierce the black cotton, thrusting itself into the air like a nipple, like the valve on a tire, no, an inner tube. Yes, that was it, the vision floating through her mind as she moved into Fan Through The Back—under her too tight skin was an inner tube she could inflate.

This is the image she takes with her to each Tai Chi class, to every practice, to each and every exercise. Soon she will transcend Cross Hands, Move 107, and lift her toe to her mouth. A sublime stork, indeed. Then she will be as graceful as the great white bird, unruffled, dignified in a room full of women.

THUNDER

This is the very best time. The hours before lunch in The Dragon. Hours when the theatre is truly his own. All that can be heard are his footsteps, the click of his keys, the snap of his film. In these hours he previews movies most of which he never intends to show his select public. There are days when he must watch the latest Hollywood imitations from Hong Kong or the peasant dramas from China. His bread and butter. But there are other days when he runs *White Palace, 9½ Weeks, Cowgirls in Bondage,* for himself.

His floors are very clean. No popcorn in the aisles. He doesn't permit popcorn. So when he comes down from the booth to his worn plush maroon seat, he feels nothing under his feet but the chill of perfect concrete. Painted red, red curtains, red wallpaper. He's satisfied.

The film on the screen is a shot of electricity that starts his heart, the red walls expand and quiver, his stomach becomes light, his mouth dry. At the moment the images enter him, he remembers he is below the street, he has locked out the day, he is no longer a pedestrian. The girl opens her naked legs, the camera as predatory as his eye, closes in on a sparse crop of fair hair. There's a tingle in his right testicle. The specific nature of his response no longer surprises him. What does give him pause is that his physical response is never this pinpoint when he looks at his wife's dark privacy.

Now why had he thought that? It was tantamount to inviting her into his space. The idea was cold rain on his neck sending a shiver down his back into his left ball. Not entirely unpleasant. What if he were to bring her here one day? Sit her right down in the heart of the house and put on this movie. What would she do? Would she be an obedient wife and watch? He notices his breathing has quickened. That hasn't happened in a very long time. Not since he first started his private ritual of screening naughty films. What would go through her mind?

In the dark he could hear her breathing, a rapid shock of air. Embarrassed eyes, embarrassed by naked men in cowboy boots. He hadn't thought of that. He hardly noticed the men in these movies. They were just there to prop open the women's legs. Something like a fleshy doorstop. Now he wishes she wasn't here. He doesn't like the idea of those men. And her, too surprised to hide her eyes. He looks hard at the young actors. Tall, well-muscled unlike his own race in this. Surely she would find their excess of flesh and hair repulsive? Wasn't she used to his smooth fine skin, his compact limbs? After all, good women desire only husbands.

Although in shock, she would flee. Yes, there was no point to his spec-

ulations. She would surely go. What a fool. It had been a bad idea to bring her here. Sitting in the dark, he couldn't help but wonder what she was doing at this moment.

WIND

It has been light for some time, but Our Lady of the Gilded Shoes still sits wrapped in a blanket. She hasn't moved from her place over the hot air vent since her last trick left hours ago. The old curving vine cast iron floor grate connects her like tendril tips to the other apartments, the boiler room, and even the kitchen of The Dragon. She should be able to smell the various breakfasts soon; wonders if the various occupants can smell the wet wool covering her rump. She sniffs, her facial muscles twitch and the dried blood on her face cracks. Closing her eyes, she sees herself sitting suspended over a black hole that catches her blood as it drips from her body. If she stood back, she could see the hole leads to the centre of the earth.

The bell sounds on the door of the shoe store below, and her eyes open. Mr. Shoe has arrived. Soon she will smell his coffee perking. From her special seat she predicts he uses an old style coffee pot on a hotplate. Will he get a warm blooded whiff of her as he opens his nose to the coffee? Will he wonder? If not today, then perhaps tomorrow or the next day as she soaks the blanket. There is no doubt, she must sit over the hole her entire time. She knew this the minute the john finished wiping his bloody hands on her face. It had nothing to do with the fact that he had wiped himself with a twenty dollar bill then dropped it on her stomach. Not even half the price. She hadn't told him she was on the rag. No, it had to do with hunkering down in a wind with the smell of your own blood.

WATER

He has been invited to float in the DEAD SEA. The flyer came through the mail slot in the shoe shop door. *New Age Health Club offering salt water meditation tanks. Float in the darkness of your dreams, murmur your mantra as you rock gently.*

"What if you don't have a mantra?" he questions the ad.

Looking for an address on the flyer, he expects to find such tanks housed in a suburban leisure centre with the wave pool and sauna. Instead they are three blocks away. He can't believe he hasn't heard of the place before now. A health club on this side of the tracks? Mantra or no

mantra, he now feels obliged to visit. He has always been a good floater. That's why the business of a mantra bothers him. Is it considered a necessity, the password into New Age Health? No matter, he can't resist water, it's in his blood, he'll walk down tonight.

He stands naked in front of the door. It reminds him of the outside cellar doors in horror movies: a plank and plywood cover on mystery. This door is red cedar, as pungent as pepper in the warm moist air rising off the tank inside. Once open, the body size door reveals a black hole. Not even a prick of artificial starlight in the draped dome of thick black plastic. He slips feet first into the salt sea and as he lowers himself, the door, tilted at an angle, automatically closes with a heaviness that betrays the cost of soundproofing. Black, there is only black and the smell of steam, salt and poly. The handle, he feels the wall for the door handle, tries it, a bar of light codes his relief.

Then darkness. Floating on darkness he closes his eyes, the insides of his eyelids a more natural shade. No sound unless he splashes, creates waves, stirs up the electrolyte soup out of which life could rise up around him. It brushes his thigh—a delicate tentacle, a sweet antenna, against his shoulder something of the jellyfish. None are phosphorescent. Not even the two parts of himself. In absolute darkness he is head; in buoyant darkness he is body. The head needs no body in this first midnight. The body no longer defined, reforms, reverts to a fabric of cells like a muslin shroud dropped on the water. Water and salt stain him, leave their mark so that every cell quivers.

His head has never known his body, this body. Never known the fragile power of each and every cell. If he were to open his eyes, he would now see that he is made of dots of light. No need to look, he knows this is true. Besides, it is growing red behind his lids. Not blood red, but fire red. There are flames in the night and cymbals galvanizing the air.

☶ MOUNTAIN

"I dance, I don't sing. I could dance 'Ave Maria' at your wedding."

"You'll be part of a choir. No one will know you can't sing."

"I didn't say I can't sing. I just don't do voice . . . I'm the physical type." Lengthening her stride, she hurries her friend past the restaurant. She doesn't want the subject of her spontaneous departure from the bridal luncheon the other afternoon to come up again. Today, together, they are walking into their past. This street was part of their growing up.

"Remember the gas station on the corner? North Star, or something like that, with that great concrete penguin, big as a truck."

"Polar Service."

"What?"

"It was called Polar Service. And it was an eight foot polar bear."

"Yeah, yeah, but the bear came later, after the penguin." She should have expected contraditions. The bride-to-be always considered herself right.

"Where are we going?" her friend asks, looking the old street over with distaste.

"You'll see." She punches her, this immaculately dressed woman, on the arm, before she can stop herself. "Old habit," she says.

They walk, she pays homage to the haunted heritage house, the candy factory, the old sandstone school. A tourist would show more polite interest. The theatre, surely the theatre where they slouched every Saturday, gradually, over the years, moving from front row centre toward the back of the house. Of course it wasn't a Chinese theatre then. It's true, they've left this world behind. But her Tai Chi lessons have brought her back and it's like she's found an old friend. She's comfortable here, relaxed. On the other side of the river, in among the towers of industry, she's a different person. All muscle and mouth strapped to the pedals of a bike. Spandex and ball cap.

Finally she gives up on the tour. "You want lunch later? Maybe The Dragon?" She pulls down on the skirt hiking up her hips. Wishes she would've put sweats on after all.

"Depends on the time. I've got a lot to do."

As they come up beside an antique store, she stops to look in the window. Her friend steps back to get a better view of the name over the door. Obviously she didn't know the shop was here. Obviously she's interested.

"Let's go in."

This is what she had hoped for. Her lead to a wedding gift. But now that her friend's in position, she drags her feet a little remembering lines of poetry she read standing in a bookstore waiting for her next job to come in over the radio at her hip. She never buys books, just reads them between deliveries. Poetry has become her favourite because it's short and so is time. Messengers are still busy like crazy, even with all the vacant offices. But this book she can't put down when a call comes through from her dispatcher. She buys it. And now she stands inside the door of this antique shop mumbling, "Some women marry houses. It's another kind of skin." Anne Sexton and her standing paralysed before this house of relics. The nail clippings of domesticity enshrined. On her it has the warning effect of a talisman. She remains on the welcome mat watching, noting what bits of sacred rag and bone her friend picks up, weighing by

hand the power of each piece. Yes, it's another kind of skin. Standing there blocking the door, she feels her skin itch and expand, her mouth tastes like the inside of a shoe.

☲ FIRE

Our Lady of the Gilded Shoes must have been working the upper end of the street, because she's the first one to reach the restaurant after the fire alarm goes off. It's a shame really, not about the restaurant, it was trendy, but the building was one of the oldest firehalls in the city. Red brick, squat and square as history, now glowing with irony. The Dragon's Chinese arrive speaking of cows and heavenly dogs devouring the moon. They're trailing their children who say, "Shit, look at the dump burn. Awesome."

Mr. Shoe comes along just as the firetrucks pull up wailing to high heaven. He recognizes Our Lady as the new tenant in the apartment above his shop. He's distracted by her shoes. Spike heels that could kill. Stilettos of base metal—gold and silver. The assault is double-edged as he watches the woman bend over, tight skirting riding black nylons up past garters to no man's land, and take her right shoe in hand to inspect for some sore point. The heel glints red in the firelight. The gilded lady cocks her shoe at a firefighter on the end of a hose. His cheeks burn.

Turning away, Mr. Shoe discovers the owner of the theatre beside him. They stand silent before the fire, until the old woman from The Dragon's kitchen comes up banging a pot lid with a stainless steel ladle. Her family makes no move to ban her noise.

"Why is she doing that?" He stares openly at her.

"To scare away the beast. Save the moon and the old from misfortune."

"Sorry?"

"Fire is good and bad."

She points her ladle at the moon eclipsed by the rising smoke. "Sing, sing," she commands.

He looks up through the yellow haze. Head up, he's struck from behind. He thinks of the beast. Swinging around, he's confronted by a woman balanced on a bike, her feet still locked into the pedals as if an invisible barrier, perhaps the smoke, prevents her from running him over. Her windbreaker announces Xpress Messenger; her expression of disdain for his pedestrian presence confirms her position. A courier in Chinese slippers? How flimsy. She should know better.

"Shit, are you blind?" She stares hard.

He steps aside and waves her through with a flourish. She glances back at him over her shoulder. Following in her wake, he eventually stands beside her. She has moved up dangerously close to the burning building. The exposed skin of his face, his hands feel the flames intensify then die back. He wonders at the cause. A hum comes from her. He leans in to listen. There are words, she is singing. He sings too.

Anna Synenko

Architectural Secrets #1

Like albino bats, asleep,
save for the occasional autumn eye,
already weeping through worn cheesecloth,
sachets of dried seeds
hang from the dusty rafters
of an add-on.

Small hard kidneys,
small matte pearls,
some saved from recent years,
but the prized ones, the ones shown often,
hold within them the genetic ghosts
of Russian, German, or Venezuelian soil;

these, and the shape
of byzantine onions, hung up by their hair
like long locked heretics,
make the grandmother's house.

She names the original village
when dipping her hand into each sack,
and with opened palm,
maps the essential journey of gardens;
transformations, fertility, lineage
—each metamorphosis a memory sealed
like mud in a glacier,
where the aging process is contained,
where how far back you go
depends on where you stand.

Captives of the sun,
in white cloth embryos,
they anticipate the spark,
wait for solid ground.

Terry Worobetz

Canadian city nature poem

The crowd closes,
fans back,
a paper flower
in flames

Out for blood
he swings
screams
you're all used up you slut
she dodges
says nothing
someone yells
get 'em
and laughs
another chants
you're all used up
she waits
for her moment
this moment
she pushes the knife
into the pillow
of his groin
then darts
he slobbers
on the ground
whispers
I don't wanna die
his voice
echoing later
in stories
coffee shops
homes
in scattered
petals
of laughter

The Personals

Leslee Becker

It was the second year of the drought. Warm winds rattled the palms, and at night, during the long, hazy sunsets, an orange corridor of dust and smoke lined the sky. Earthquake weather, people said, that second summer and well into the fall, as if they were expected, maybe even eager, for something to happen soon.

Alice Pike was alone in her bookshop the day of the earthquake. It was an hour before closing time, and she was thinking of what she'd have for dinner. The bell over the entrance sounded and the shades clapped against the windows. Then the real rumble began, a fierce banging, followed by a dizzying churning motion that freed the books from their shelves. The last thing Alice saw before she sought cover under a desk were the leaves on the palm trees lifting like skirts, and people outside running and falling.

She left the store soon afterwards, joining a procession of drivers moving through streets bereft of traffic lights.

There was no electricity in her apartment, and in the dim light Alice saw that her pictures had fallen from the wall, some books and knick-knacks too. She found one candle and a flashlight, but when she tried the radio, the batteries were dead.

What she would recall later, and vividly, was that she had found herself following other people, ending up in an unfamiliar part of the city. An ice cream truck trolled the dark streets, playing a melody. She watched and heard it pass three times as she stood in line at a convenience store. Next to her, a man with a baby pleaded for milk. Occasionally, the door to the store would open and a hand would reach for money.

"I got five kids," a woman said, tugging on Alice's sleeve. "Please, lady, some money for dinner."

Alice reached into her billfold and gave the woman five dollars. Then the door opened and she asked the clerk for six batteries. When the clerk told her the price—thirteen dollars—she bought wine instead and a pack of cigarettes.

She returned to her apartment and called Sybil Spencer, the woman who worked for her in the bookshop. "The power's out all over," she said. "I'm surprised the phone works. I'm glad you're okay."

"I've been staying by my phone," Sybil said, "trying to get through to my family."

"Of course," Alice said and hung up.

The power returned the next day and all during that morning Alice watched television, seeing and hearing eyewitness accounts of the event.

She left her apartment early in the afternoon and went to a department store, determined to buy things to prepare her for the next time. Clerks busied themselves replacing merchandise on the shelves and customers roamed the broad aisles, their baskets filled with purchases. Alice grabbed batteries and candles and then heaped her basket with bubble bath, creams, and lotions. She stayed by the cosmetics display, deliberating among the shiny tubes of lipstick. Then, with a trembling hand, inserted one of the tubes into her purse. In the hardware section, a slim, black flashlight found its way into the open mouth of her purse as if both were magically alive, like fish.

Then she joined a long line of patrons in the checkout lane. Ahead of her was a handsome man who was buying batteries too, and toys and candy.

"I paid thirteen dollars for batteries yesterday," she said, "and I gave the rest of my money to a homeless person."

The man shook his head. "I go over the Bay Bridge every day. Yesterday, I started home later. My family didn't know where I was."

"It makes you take stock and think," Alice said.

She left the store, her heart racing as she got on the freeway. In a short time she turned around, entered the parking lot of a movie theatre complex and found herself talking to the woman in the ticket booth, telling her how surprised she was that the theatre was open.

"They figured people needed to relax," the woman said.

"This is the first weekday matinee I've gone to in years," Alice told her. "I run a bookshop. That's where I was when it happened."

"I don't feel safe no more," the clerk said, "but I volunteered to come in today."

"Yes," Alice said, then went into the theatre and chose a seat in the middle where one lone patron, a man, sat.

When the lights dimmed and the movie started, Alice felt afraid for the first time and found herself close to tears. She imagined other people doing important things, pitching in with the cleanup process, taking stock of their lives, and realizing how very fragile their hold was on anything.

When she returned home and looked at the things from the department store, she felt disoriented, as if she had picked up someone else's purchases.

The next day she reopened the bookstore, and with Sybil's help got things back in order. Sybil talked about her family and Alice told her about

the man who went over the bridge later than usual and about people in the Santa Cruz mountains finding huge fissures in the earth and homes so buckled that fireplace hearths jutted out into living rooms. She described these things as if they had happened to her, and later when she returned home, she watched television again and found herself moved at the sight of people on the street, their possessions heaped in carts and bags.

It was exactly two weeks later that she began reading the Personals. She tried to picture the writers and to imagine herself with them in a restaurant or theatre. She was convinced that some of the people in the cafe she passed on her way home from work were writers and respondents, meeting perhaps for the first time, finding beyond the initial pleasantries something solid and revealing.

She had grown accustomed to men in the ads describing their physical attributes and financial status, and their specific desire for a particular kind of woman. She found an odd comfort too, in knowing these were not the men for her. They seemed young and too certain of what they wanted and what they could not possibly tolerate.

But the one ad she read and reread said: "Recent widower with easily triggered sense of humour, seeks companion. Entering life's clubhouse turn, I find myself alone."

Alice began her letter by telling the writer she liked his ad. After that, she wasn't sure what to say. She glanced back at other ads and mentioned that she owned her own business, liked rainy days, and watching movies.

"I have a sense of humour," she wrote and looked at the sentence and the earlier paragraph. She wished she could think of something funny to say, but she could not. "I make people laugh all the time, but that is not my intention in this letter.

"I find myself alone too," she concluded, then signed it and dropped it in the mailbox immediately.

Later that night she regretted sending the letter, and worse, signing it and giving her phone number and address. What if the writer were someone she knew? What if he were dangerous? This is how things happen to people.

It was not until the next day, when she saw Sybil in the store, that she recalled her dream. In it, she was alone in a small, dark room, her bed facing a door that suddenly opened. Something was flung into the room, landing with a wet thud at the foot of her bed.

She did not tell Sybil about the dream and knew she would never reveal that she had answered a Personal ad. Sybil had been in her employ less than six months. Like Alice, she was middle-aged, single, and kept to herself.

"I felt after-shocks yesterday," Sybil said. "I suspect we'll be feeling them for a long time."

"I'm afraid so," Alice answered.

"I've never seen the supermarket so busy. I bought lobsters. Then I went out to dinner."

"Did you go with someone?"

"I went alone. Later, I drove to the ocean."

"I should do that sometime," Alice said. "I hardly ever go to the ocean."

"Yes, it's nice. Maybe we could go and take in a movie too."

Poor thing, Alice thought. She's lonely.

That night after she closed the shop, Alice went into a store, bought wine, flowers, and a lobster.

The writer called two weeks later. Alice was watching a rental movie when a man called, identifying himself as Warren Mackie. Alice turned off the volume on the tv and watched the figures move as Warren Mackie spoke. "I have your letter," he said, "and I have one I was meaning to send, but I decided to call instead. Is this a bad time, Miss Pike?"

"No," Alice replied.

"I've never answered the Personals before," he said.

"Neither have I."

"We have that in common."

"I wasn't expecting a call," Alice said.

"I had to act," he told her. Then, after a pause, he told her he was fifty five, financially stable, and enjoyed eating out and going to movies. "It's your turn," he said.

"I'm forty five. I like movies and eating in general," she said and chuckled.

"Do you have your health?"

"Yes, yes, I have."

"Miss Pike," he said. "How would you feel about a gentleman buying you dinner, say Friday?"

"Friday," Alice said. "I could meet you on Friday."

"All rightie," he said. "How will I know you?"

"I'm slim. I have brown hair, medium length," she said and found it difficult to continue. "I'll be wearing a green coat."

"I'm on the light side myself," he said. "Brown hair and a moustache. We'll find each other, Miss Pike."

They established a place and time, and then, moments after she hung up, Alice wished she had gotten his phone number in case she decided to back out. She looked in the phone book but could find no listing for him.

She wished, too, that she had asked him how many responses he received and why he chose her.

On Thursday evening, Alice asked Sybil out to dinner. "My treat," she said. "It's been exactly one month since the earthquake. We should commemorate it."

They went to the cafe near the shop. After some desultory talk about the store, they sat, looking at each other and at the other patrons.

"Do you still like California?" Alice asked.

"Oh, yes," Sybil answered. "I feel I've put down roots."

"Despite the earthquake," Alice remarked.

"Yes, in a way it helped me feel more connected with the place. I met some people in my apartment building I wouldn't have gotten to know otherwise, and when I went over to volunteer at the library, I met new people. If you think the store was hit hard, you should've seen the library."

"I read about it," Alice said. "I didn't know you helped out over there."

"It's the least I could do. It took my mind off things. You know, this is the second time I've lived out here. I was much younger the first time. My sister and I came out together. We could've headed east or west, and we flipped a coin. It came up heads, for east, but we followed our hearts' desire and aimed the car west. We stayed in motels and got waitressing jobs. It was awful, but exciting too in a way. I can't imagine doing such a thing now."

"I can," Alice said, thinking of the real difference it would make, living on the outskirts of some town or city, being able to move on, quickly. "I wish," she said, "I could put all my things in a car."

"And?" Sybil said.

"I don't know. Start over again, I guess."

The woman at the piano had begun to sing, and the cafe was filling up with people, with couples. Alice saw a man with a moustache and wondered if he could be Warren Mackie. He was with a young, attractive woman. She found herself trying to hear their conversation, but Sybil had raised her voice and was leaning toward her.

"What about you?" she was saying. "What's your story?"

"I came here with a man. We were together three years," Alice said, then called to the waitress for brandy. "I don't know whatever happened to him."

"Did he leave you?" Sybil asked.

"No. I left him."

"Mine was a baker. I put on fifteen pounds living with him. He made wonderful pies. He was famous for his pies," she added with a smile.

"What happened?" Alice said.

"He died. He was twenty years older than I was. He died."

"How sad," Alice remarked.

"He had this other family. There were squabbles. I found his daughters going throughout the house right after the funeral. They went through his bureaus and filled paper sacks with his things. Socks and neck ties. Can you imagine? I've got a picture of him in my billfold," she said and showed Alice a photograph of a tiny man holding an ugly miniature dog.

"That's him. That's Roger," Sybil said.

"Roger," Alice said, realizing she had been expecting to see a larger, robust-looking man.

"He loved that old dog," Sybil said, brushing the photograph with her fingertips before returning it to her wallet. "I've got more pictures in the apartment. I could show you things some time, including vicious letters from his daughters. I've saved them. I could show you," she said.

Alice was uncertain of what to say. She felt disappointed with the evening and wasn't sure if it was because she had hoped to say something revealing, or because Sybil seemed so eager to talk. "Some day, we'll have to get together and swap stories," she said.

"I'd like that," Sybil said. "I could cook dinner. I'm a good cook, but it's hard living alone. I come home, eat microwave dinners and watch tv. I know I'm missing out on something. You know, you're the only person I feel close to."

"We'll have to talk again sometime," Alice said.

As she drove her to her apartment complex, hearing Sybil thank her again and again for the evening, Alice had the odd feeling of being a suitor. She kept the car running outside the building, and for a moment, the two sat in silence.

"Would you like to come in for coffee?" Sybil asked.

"I can't tonight. Some other time perhaps."

"Okay," Sybil asked. "Back to the salt mines tomorrow."

Alice watched her walk into the building, and when she was certain she was safely inside, she drove home.

The next morning she awoke with a terrible headache. She called Sybil and told her she would not be in.

"Uh, oh," Sybil said. "Too much vino."

"No, it could be the flu. All my joints ache."

"I've got just the thing for that. Garlic soup. I could drop by with some."

"No, but thank you anyhow."

All that morning she lay in bed, taking aspirin, and feeling the weight of the headache bearing down on her. She couldn't imagine what it would be like meeting a stranger in a restaurant, feeling as she did. She wished she

could send Sybil in her place and had no trouble imagining Sybil hitting it off with the man.

It was raining when she awoke later. She was cold, and her head still ached. She heated up some soup and ate it in bed while depressing afternoon programs played on tv, most of them featuring people describing personal misfortunes. She closed her eyes and recalled passing by homes when she was a child, going to and from school, and hearing through screened windows radios and televisions, and feeling a pang of sadness for the people inside. She had imagined women in house robes and men in pajamas and slippers, ill, or out of work, and wondered how their lives had come to this. It won't happen to me, she remembered telling herself then and years later when she was with the man she had described to Sybil.

He was a salesman, and when he was out covering his territory she spent long, dreary days in a spare apartment in a complex much like the one Sybil lived in, with walls so insubstantial she could hear the rattle of pots and pans next door, conversations and lovemaking, and sometimes even the frank sound of a blow.

Then he was promoted and no longer had to travel. They looked at houses and shopped for furniture and finally moved into a tract house in a suburban neighbourhood. She left him soon after that, not, as he had claimed, because she was afraid of happiness, but because she was afraid of getting lost.

The day she left she loaded up her car, followed the circular drives in the neighbourhood, ending up right back on her block, then later passed streets and houses looking so much like theirs she felt trapped and believed she could enter any one of the houses and find herself greeted, not at all like a stranger.

It was still raining and she was running late as she left to meet Warren Mackie. The restaurant was noisy, the tables all occupied, and behind them, a line of people waited. She felt a small despair when she saw an older man alone at a corner table wearing an old-fashioned brown suit and a hopeless toupee. He was thin, and his hands clenched the edges of the table as if he expected it to be taken away. He stood, the moment she approached his table.

"Miss Pike?" he said and smiled. He held the chair out for her and took her coat. "You didn't wear your green coat," he said.

"I forgot. I'm sorry. I've been in bed all day with a terrible headache. A migraine."

"A migraine," he said and winced.

"Have you been waiting long?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said. "You have your rain. You like rainy days."

"Yes, yes, I do."

"We need the rain," he remarked, then chuckled. "I wasn't going to talk about the earthquake or the weather. Could you eat, Miss Pike?"

"I can always eat," she said, and he laughed politely.

They looked at the menus and ordered cocktails and appetizers.

"If I may say so," he said, "you must be a trusting person. You gave your name, phone number and address."

"Did the others give box numbers?" Alice asked.

"There were no others," he said.

Alice waited a moment, then told Warren Mackie she had considered putting an ad in herself. "Then I saw yours, and I said to myself, 'Why not?'"

"Exactly," he said. "Thatta girl."

"Life's short."

"Not mine," he said and laughed. "I lied. I'm not fifty five."

"You don't look your age," Alice said.

"You *do* have a sense of humour," he said. "This might be an artificial date, but there's no need for us to be artificial. I'll tell you about myself, and you tell me about yourself, or you can start first. What'll it be, Alice?"

"You go first, Warren," she said.

"Well," he began, "my wife died. Doris, just this past year. I have a son and a daughter, both married, both living far away, so you don't have to worry about them meddling in our affairs. I sell shoes for a living, been doing it for years. I've got a chain of stores, four to be exact. I'm not rich, but I'm not poor either. I play golf, as you may have guessed from my ad. Not much to show for a life, huh? When you spell it out like that, it doesn't look like much, I guess. Doris, well, she was sick a long time, so I can't say her death came as a shock. This part does, though." He paused and looked away from her. "A couple of months ago, I hooked up with an outfit specializing in matching up people. My match turned out to be a sad sack. Maybe she was mental. Get a load of these, Alice," he said, reaching for a sheet of paper, which he began to read from. "'Do you often ponder past misfortunes? Do you have the kind of life limited to only a few expressions of enthusiasm? Do you browse through railway timetables, directories or dictionaries just for pleasure? Do you suspect the actions of others?' "And get this, Alice, 'Do you often sit and think about death, sickness, pain and sorrow?'"

Alice said, "yes," to herself, but shook her head and laughed along with Warren Mackie.

"See, that's what she did on our first date. Handed me those questions."

"What'd you do on your second date?"

"Hah," he said and laughed. "Second date. I'll tell you something. The only time she got animated was when she described her personal history, just the bad parts, mind you."

"What was she looking for, I wonder?"

"What are any of us looking for?" he said, his face turning serious. "You feeling better, Alice?"

"Yes, I think the drink and food helped," she said. "How old was the woman you dated?"

"Middle aged. She never stopped to smell the roses, if you know what I mean. Well, enough about her. What about you? Ever been married?"

"No. I came close one time, though. I have no regrets, mind you."

"I do. Plenty. Right now, I wish I had ordered the trout," he said and laughed. "Are you regretting this date?"

"No, I like meeting new people," she said.

"You haven't told me much about yourself, Alice."

"I haven't? I guess I'm afraid of sounding like your other date."

"Fat chance," he said. "You could begin by telling me exactly what you're after. What made you go to the Personals?"

"I'm not sure. Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked, and he shook his head. When she reached into her purse, she saw the stolen tube of lipstick. "After the earthquake, I took stock of things, I guess you could say. I wasn't attached to anything. Just habits. Eating alone, watching tv. Something felt missing. I've always believed something was in store for me, maybe just around the corner."

"Yes, yes," he said. "I know the feeling."

"After the earthquake, I think I expected that things would change, that people would change."

"My kids," he said, "were worried sick. It took them two days to reach me. I did the strangest thing. Strange for me anyhow. I went to church. I tried to pray. I tell you it's the most alone I ever felt. It didn't help."

"I went to a movie," Alice said.

"Good for you. I like you, Alice. You live in the here and now."

"I don't like to think too far ahead," she said. "I just follow my heart's desire. That's how I ended up here."

"On this date?"

"Yes, and coming to California in the first place. I didn't know a soul when I came to this town."

"I want to show you something," he said. He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and showed her a black and white photograph of a small store. "It's my parents' store. They sold clothes, to farmers mainly. My father started out with a truck and some general merchandise,

blankets, work boots, and so forth. He used to drive up into the country and deliver things to farmers. Then he and my mother got their little store in town. Doesn't look like much, but they made it. Then I went into the business myself. Now, I own four stores." He leaned over and looked beneath the table. "What are you, a six, Alice? Six narrow. You have a slim, lovely foot."

"Six and a half," she said, feeling a blush come to her cheeks.

"You know what they say about small feet, doncha?"

She shook her head.

"Small feet, small shoes," he said and laughed.

Alice looked down at her feet and laughed with him.

"Do you have pictures of your family?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, "but you don't want to see those, do you?"

She nodded and he showed her a photograph of his son and daughter as children, then one of his wife, a large and pretty woman with vivid dark eyes. "These are all old, of course," he said, then put the photographs away. He looked at his watch, and then for a moment both of them remained silent. "Dessert?" he said finally.

"I couldn't eat another thing," she said, thinking of what would happen next. He would walk her to her car, and they would part. Perhaps he would ask about calling again.

He helped her with her coat, and then they went outside. It had stopped raining. The sky was clear, and the air felt cool. People strolled the streets, looking in shop windows.

"My car's just up the street," she said and started to point to it when she felt something yank against her right shoulder and with it the sensation that she was being undressed, her coat and purse strap sliding from her arms. She saw the boy, her bag in his hand, and Warren pursuing him.

"Warren," she shouted and felt embarrassed as a young couple made their way toward her. "I've been robbed," she said, then saw Warren running back toward her, holding the bag in both hands against his chest.

"I got it, Alice!" he shouted. "I got it!"

"All right," the young man said. "Way to go. You want us to call the police?"

Warren shook his head and handed the bag to Alice. "Just a kid," he said, trying to catch his breath. "It happened so fast. You all right, Alice?"

"I'm all right," she said. "I didn't even hear him."

"He came up right behind her," Warren said. "Next thing I knew I was chasing him. I caught him, just like that."

"Jeez," the young man said, shaking his head. He took his girlfriend's hand. "We saw it."

"We'll take it from here," Warren said to the couple. He extended his arm to Alice, and they began walking down the street. "I didn't think I had it in me. Just a kid. He's gone now. Long gone. Good thing he was alone."

"Something like this has never happened to me before. I don't know how to thank you," she said, uncertain of what else to say or if she should begin to draw away from his.

"We're all right, Alice. By God, we did it this time. Did you see the look on that couple's face? I showed them, didn't I?"

"Yes," she said, "yes."

"I don't want to go home," he said. "Please, stay with me a little longer. All right?"

"Just for a little while," she said and went with him to his car. He opened the door for her, and when he got in she could hear the sound of his breathing. When he reached across the seat to open the glove compartment, his hand brushed her knee. "Sorry," he said and took from the glove compartment a silver flask and offered it to her. She drank from it, and so did he, and as they sat in the car she felt as if she were someone else, someplace else and that whatever happened afterwards would not matter.

"I feel like a kid," he said, "doing this."

"I know exactly what you mean," she said.

He held up his hand. It was shaking. "Damndest thing," he said. "I haven't felt this good in a long time. Trust me."

He started the car, and in a short time they were on the outskirts of town. "All this," he said, pointing to the stores and lights, "used to be orchards. People had picnics where this highway is. You should've seen it. It was something. See those railway tracks over there. At night, the snakes used to curl up beside the rail to warm themselves, and hoboes slept in the underpasses. My brother and I used to shoot our BB guns at their tin cans. I wanted to be a hobo, or maybe work for the railroad." He shrugged. "I sell shoes. Good thing for us we can't see too far ahead."

"I agree," she said, then remained quiet.

"Tennessee Williams sold shoes. Did you know that, Alice?"

"I didn't know that," she said. "The man I almost married was a salesman. Pharmaceuticals."

"Pharmaceuticals," Warren said. "What happened to him?"

"I lost him. That was a long time ago. The funniest thing happened, only it wasn't funny at the time. I started having dreams about big pieces of furniture swallowing me up."

"And?"

"It happened. My dream came true."

Warren laughed. Then Alice laughed too.

They were entering a mall. The stores were closed for the night, and in the mammoth lot the trees looked thin and tentative.

"See that," Warren said and pointed to a small shop called Great Strides. "That's mine. That's my shoe store."

"Great Strides," Alice said. "It's a good name."

"Doris came up with it. Want to see it from the inside? We won't stay long, promise."

They got out of the car and entered the store. Alice looked at the shoes on the sale rack and began to feel embarrassed.

"Sit down, relax," Warren said, then disappeared into the back room.

Alice looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was mussed and her coat and face looked drab and pale under the bright lights. She recalled what she felt as she prepared to meet her date and how she had felt later in the car and wished she could go back to that moment when Warren brushed her knee and when she drank from the flask, but the moment had passed, the feeling too, and before her she saw a severe, pinched, looking woman.

Suddenly, music began and Warren emerged from the back room, holding liquor and glasses, shoe boxes and stockings against his chest like a looter.

"For you," he said, spreading the things at her feet. He opened the boxes and removed shoes with dramatic high heels. The room was rich with the smell of leather and liquor. "I've got handbags too," he said, spreading his arms expansively. "For you, Doris."

She knew he had not realized his mistake, and she said nothing as he sat on the floor in front of her, pushing the shoes toward her feet. She felt his hand on her heel, the shoe sliding off effortlessly. She watched the back of him in the mirror and did not want to look at herself as he lifted her foot and pressed it against his chest.

"I don't want to be alone any more," he said.

She felt her foot slipping from his hand, the stocking rasping under his fingers. He got to his feet immediately and sat next to her. She looked to the mirror, saw him touch his toupee and wince.

"It's all right," she said. "Warren. . . "

"I'll take you home," he said.

The moment she reached for his hand he got up from the chair and began returning the shoes to the boxes. Seeing him bent over this way touched her. "I know what you're feeling," she said.

"How can you? I don't even know. I'll take you back."

He went again into the storeroom. The music stopped, and while she slipped her shoe on, she felt small, stingy, and dishonest, and for a mo-

ment had no trouble imagining herself in a different place, a child awaiting punishment.

As soon as they returned to the car, she told him what she had done the day after the earthquake. "I was in a big store. No one was paying attention to me," she said. "I stole things. No one saw me."

"Promise me," he said, "you won't tell anyone about tonight. Promise me."

"But nothing happened, Warren."

"Yeah," he said.

They returned to the street where her car was parked. The stores had closed for the night, and in the restaurants and cafés waiters were cleaning up. "The scene of the crime," he said, then reached across the front seat and opened the door for her.

"Thank you. I. . ."

"Don't," he said. "Don't tell me you had a wonderful time."

As she got out of the car, she heard him say, "Forty years. Married forty years."

She watched him drive away, and then she returned to her car. She drove by her store, and in a short time, found herself at Sybil's complex. While she waited in the car, she heard the sound of television sets and the rattle of dishes.

She was outside the door to Sybil's when she realized she had no idea why she was there or what she wanted to say. A thin frontier of light showed beneath the door, and inside a television was playing. She rang the bell and Sybil appeared, looking happy to see her. She was dressed in a blue robe and on her feet were leather slippers, large and backless, a man's slippers.

"Alice, it's you," she said. "What a surprise. Come in. Are you all right?"

"I think so," Alice said.

"That nasty old flu," Sybil said. "I'll make us some tea. Sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

Sybil turned off the tv and Alice watched her scuff across the room, stopping for a moment in front of a hall mirror to touch up her hair.

"I had to get out," Alice shouted toward the kitchen.

"Oh, I know what you mean," Sybil answered. "I can't stand being cooped up myself. If I had known you were coming, I would've tidied up."

The apartment was tidy, small and familiar, with beige, thin-looking walls. On the sofa where Alice was sitting was a *TV Guide* and on the end table some mail. She glanced at the envelopes—a cable tv bill, advertising flyers, and a bank statement. They could have been addressed to her.

In a short time, Sybil emerged from the kitchen bearing a silver tray containing cookies and a tea service.

"I have brandy too, if you'd like that," Sybil said. "I made the cookies myself."

"They're delicious," Alice said, finishing one and helping herself to another.

"Roger's recipe," Sybil said. "Of course, he made large quantities. I cut the recipe in half and still have plenty. Eat," she said. "You'll feel better."

Alice ate another cookie and imagined the smell of fresh-baked things in the small apartment, a comforting smell, sweet and warm.

"Tell me about him," Alice said. "Tell me about Roger."

Sybil moved toward her on the sofa, poured more tea into Alice's cup and urged the dish of cookies upon her. "He was older, as I've said," she began, and as she went on, Alice pictured a place with rooms exactly like hers. In the closets and drawers were a man's things, a thin, bereaved-looking man. She could see an upstairs window and a figure behind it parting the curtains and looking out to the streets below.

"I find myself alone," she could hear a voice saying.

She wanted to ask Sybil to show her the letters from Roger's daughters, hoping perhaps to find in them a confirmation of the things people did when they were desperate, but Sybil was talking about goodness and love.

"We had such times together," Sybil said. "He made love to me once right in the bakery on a long table, flour everywhere and pink boxes filled with cakes. Whenever I go in a bakery now, well, I have associations," she said and nudged Alice.

"With me, it's shoes," Alice said and knew the moment she said it that she would return to the store. She might wait outside for the close of the business day, or she might walk in and look for him. There were so many things she had not told him, so many things to be revealed that she felt a small flutter in her breast, imagining what it would be like, to feel, if only for a short time, real danger.

Yannis Goumas

two poems

Deposition

Today
Wednesday
30th May, 1990
at 9.45 a.m.
whilst on a bus to Piraeus
and outside the U.S. Embassy
I saw a dwarf—a dwarf not only dwarf
but crippled to the point of heightening his dwarfishness—
managing on legs like chopsticks in unskilled hands.
The whole scene was no more than a flash of sun
on a windscreen, but it burned a hole in my heart.
This is by way of registering the incident,
perhaps the only accolade this wretched dwarf
will ever know.

The Life of the Party

As I place my slippers
beside the bed
for a tomorrow,
it dawns on me
that all my life
has been an effort
to silence my silence.

Book of Questions

Linda Raymond

One time I came home from work and here's Barn laying up in Yolanda's bed like he owns the whole damn house. He's got a hash pipe in one hand and Yolanda's left titty in the other. When she sees me standing in the door, she pokes out her bottom lip and crosses her arms on her chest. I say "Yolanda, you got to be crazy because I know you ain't stupid. I ain't running no whore house." She puts her lip out even further and takes a drag off Barn's pipe.

If I wasn't so mad I would of laughed. Here's these two kids doing everything they can think of to be grown, sitting up naked in a bed with purple balloons flying all over the sheets. I look over on Yolanda's dresser and she still got the Easy Bake oven her Granny gave her when she turned twelve. Her floor is strewn with Barn's clothes—the flared bottom jeans I thought he never took off and one of his Dashikis. A trail of his underwear heads for the bed with one black silk sock hanging off the mattress. I look back at them and now Barn's blowing smoke out his nose. He looks at me through the haze with pale grey eyes, and I'm tongue-tied. Barn's eyebrows are smooth, every hair going the same way, like he combs them. His nose is straight and short. Underneath it he's got a silky thin mustache curling over his top lip. His lips are pooched into an old maid frown that says he's looking at something he don't like. Those nasty gray eyes look right at me. He blows smoke out and his nostrils flutter like paper. I stand there letting the smoke go up my nose, then I've had it.

"Yolanda, what you got this raggelly boy in your bed for? You're sixteen years old. He's fourteen."

She scratches her head like she got to think about it.

"Mama, you know Byron's old for his age."

"This boy ain't old enough to be in nobody's bed and particularly not in yours."

She uncrosses her arms then huffs. Now Barn's breathing his smoke in.

"I am old enough to conduct my life in a manner in which I see fit," she

says. Her skinny arms barely cover her titties. "I can make my own decisions, thank you." Barn pokes his elbow into her ribs, hands her the pipe. "Thank you Byron."

I feel like taking him by his nappy hair and pulling him out of the bed, and kick his butt out the back door. Then slam it. But I don't do none of that—I'm too tired. I'm going to do like those child psychologists in the magazines say—I'm going to talk to these children.

"Barn, do your mother know where you are?"

I don't even know why I ask him. He look like he ain't got no mother. He don't look dirty or nothing, that's not what I mean. He look like he missing something, like he looking around trying to find where he misplaced it. I know he ain't finding it in my house.

Barn looks up from his pipe.

"Do you want me to call your mama and tell her where you are?"

"No ma'am. We don't have a phone." He takes another drag off the pipe and I watch his smooth brown chest inflate.

"You want me to talk to her? Where do you live?"

Yolanda starts squirming in the bed.

"If you like," he says, "But really, Nettie Lee, I don't see that this involves either one of you." He blows out and his chest goes down to normal and he looks like a kid again. Fourteen. I go over and sit on the bed, on Barn's side. It sinks down and he almost slides into me, but he straightens himself up. He sets his back against Yolanda's pillow. He looks like a king sitting up like that, the white ruffled pillow fanning out behind him. With his left arm, skinny with a hard little muscle knotted on top, he nudges Yolanda up straight.

I can see I need to try something different, make them act like they got sense.

"You planning on marrying my daughter when y'all's baby's born?"

Yolanda busts out a laugh at that, then covers her mouth and says, "Oops."

Barn looks from Yolanda to me. "I don't believe marriage is a viable institution."

"I think it is."

"Not as practiced in the West."

Now what is he talking about—the west? We live in Ohio. That mess he smoking gone to his head. Then he go on talking like he reading from some magazine.

"And if I did decide to formally commit myself to a female, I wouldn't do it now. I'm not old enough to even consider restricting my opportunities for . . ."

He stops talking and looks at Yolanda. She's got her hand up to her forehead, wiping it back and forth. She barely turns toward him and mouths the word, "Later." With the tip of his middle finger, Barn smooths first one eyebrown, then the other.

I feel like I can't breathe right, like something is itching inside my heart. I grab that boy by his hair, put my hands into that African mess on his head, and yank. I jerk his head down to his chest. Then I do it again. He winces and takes it. But all I can think is, it's soft. His hair is soft and fine like a baby's. So I let it go. I can see he's squinting back tears.

I get up off the bed. Barn and Yolanda sit side by side, like two of the same thing, but they don't touch each other. Yolanda has a scared look I've seen too many times. Barn's face don't look like nothing to me. I tell her, "Yolanda, I'll talk to you when you get your clothes on." Then, "Barn, you better go home and don't show yourself around here no more."

I stand at the foot of the bed waiting for them to do what I said. When Barn realizes I'm not going anywhere he says, "Would you leave so I can get dressed?"

That little punk thinks he a grown man.

Yolanda is sitting on the couch next to me, plucking up a little bit of the sheet between her fingers. This couch is where I sleep, because I know a teenage girl needs a bedroom to herself. Someplace she can go and plan her future or just dream. At first she said, "No, Mama. If you're not here I'll get lonely." But after I put my things in the hall closet she started to like having the room be hers. Now, she pulls up another piece of the sheet and rubs it with her thumb. I suppose she's waiting for me to start.

"Yolanda, honey, you are a fine young lady, now. Almost grown." She doesn't answer. "You have to take care of yourself because a boy is not thinking of doing it for you." She studies the piece of sheet in her hands, turns it over and rubs the other side. "Do you hear what I'm saying to you?"

"Saying the same thing you always say."

"And just what is that?"

"Men are no good."

"What?

"Oh Mama, I'm sorry, but every time we talk about anything it always comes back to 'Men are no good.' We can be talking about something as stupid as dinner, and it turns out we can't have what you'd like because we don't have the money and we don't have the money because of Daddy, who left you because 'Men are no good.' We talk about your friend Rita. I say how is Rita today? and you say, 'Men are no good. Her boy-

friend left her in the middle of the night, got right up out of the bed, left her hugging the pillow.' Everything we talk about got to have the same conclusion. I just get tired of hearing it sometimes."

"I wasn't about to say that. If you could wait a minute and listen you'd find out what I was about to say."

Oh, my feet hurt. Hurt worse than they ever did. I got to work eight hours every day bending over that conveyor belt, picking up those flanges, trying to see if they made right, and I got to come home to this mess. I kick off my shoes, pushing them back under the couch, then bend down to rub my corns. They hard and dry—I'll use some lotion on them tonight, rub the sore spots out.

"First of all," I say, "I was talking about birth control. You using any?"

Yolanda looks back to the hank of sheet in her hands. "Mama, that's personal."

"Not if you have a baby!"

"It would be my baby."

"Not in this house!"

"Would you please give me some credit for having common sense? I wouldn't have a baby if I didn't want one. I'm smarter than that. Byron doesn't want a baby anyway. He said so."

"At fourteen I should hope not."

"Mama, I keep telling you that age doesn't matter. It's just a number like on a lottery ticket. Some people act older, some people act younger, and their birth certificates say they're the same age." She looks so sincere about what she saying, makes my head hurt.

"Do y'all think you're in love?"

"I love him, yes."

"He love you back?"

She don't say anything, rests her hands in her lap. She got hands like fresh-baked sugar cookies—plump, tan skin, nails buffed pink. I hate to see those hands go to waste patting Barn on the behind. Yolanda's smart and could be a teacher if she wanted to. I just don't know why she don't want to.

"He loves me," she says. "He hasn't said it yet, but I know he does."

"His hair that short you can read his mind?"

She gives me a look. "No, Mama. He treats me like he loves me. He lets me talk. He doesn't tell me what to do. I feel like I can take a deep breath around him."

"Girl, if you want to breathe, there's a whole big world full of air right past that door. Go outside and knock yourself out."

Yolanda sighs, sucking up our words and pushing them out again.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," she says and stands up. "And do

you know why? Because you don't know who I am. You don't have a clue."

As she slams the front door, I see my old yellow sheet has a dent in it where she been sitting.

I didn't catch Barn at my house after that, but I knew. I could smell him in the air in Yolanda's bedroom and on her sheets and pillowcases, a sharp odor that came off his head and got into everything, not a bad smell, just different from Yolanda's. When she was a little girl, three or four, I'd lay my cheek down on top of her head just before I'd wash her hair. I'd lay my cheek flat against her braids and smell that smell. I could get drunk off it. A smell like fresh dirt. Barn's smell was like that too, but different somehow.

That smell was around so much, I started feeling like there was a ghost in the house, the ghost of Barn. Seemed like if I turned around fast enough I'd catch him disappearing around a corner, maybe going to the bathroom to pee, or sliding into the kitchen to empty his ashtray. But the place his shadow grew clear was in the smirk on Yolanda's face. I wanted to tell her, "Girl, you don't have a secret," but that smile wasn't an invitation to talk.

I watched her when I was home at night. She didn't go out too much, especially on school nights. By the time I got home she'd have dinner started. She made pretty good spaghetti sauce from the *I Hate to Cookbook,* so that's what we ate. When I walked in she'd already be at the kitchen table with her school books spread out in front of her, hunched over in her chair, arms crossed, a frown pulling her face into a point. She never asked me for help, just looked up from her books and said "hi." Then I'd say, "What'd you do today?" and the ghost of Barn would slide around the corner and flush the toilet. I'd go lay down on the couch for just a little while to rest before dinner, but ninety-nine times out of ten I'd fall asleep.

What goes around comes back. Yolanda started missing school, started staying in the bed, stopped having dinner ready when I came home. Said she must have the flu.

One morning it's already eight-thirty, snow on the ground, and I'm running from the bathroom, pulling on my coat, trying to make my bus. I look in the bedroom on my way out.

She's in bed with the blanket pulled up over her head. She looks small, just a little lump under the covers. I go to the window and yank the drapes open. Thin December sunlight, the kind that don't warm nobody, comes in. Dust is flying all around, them drapes been closed so long. I

lean over Yolanda, pull back the blanket and press my hand against her forehead. Feels like touching myself.

"Yolanda, you sick again?"

She turns over so she's facing the wall and says, "Yeah," like she's half-dead.

"What you think is wrong with you? I never heard of no flu last three months." I'm trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice, but there it is anyway.

She sits up, squeezes her face into a frown, boosts herself out of bed and runs to the bathroom groaning. Oh hell, my job can wait. I sit on her bed trying to figure out what I'm going to say. When she comes back, she lays flat on the bed and stares straight up.

"Go ahead and ask me," she says, looking at that same spot on the ceiling. "Go ahead."

"How far gone are you?"

She darts her eyes at me. They say this is not the question she expects. I smooth the hair back from her forehead, away from her eyes. Her face is a blotchy jigsaw puzzle, the pieces are all there, but they can be shook loose. Her hair feels rough under my hand, so I smooth it down and smooth it down, until she closes her eyes and says, "June."

Men are no good. And it's too damn bad because they don't have to be that way. They do things just to be doing them. When Walter left me and Yolanda, I asked him over and over, "Why? Why are you going?" He said, "Why you got to be so nosy, Nettie Lee? I'm going because I feel like it. That all right with you?" I stood out on the sidewalk with Yolanda in my arms. I never even thought of answering him back. I didn't want to waste my breath.

Now I hear Yolanda in the bedroom talking on the phone. First little whispers, then loud screams.

"You trifling nigger, you. . . "

I block it out. I shut off my ears. I look out the window, out to the street. That's where I'd rather be. Away from here.

One night in May I came home from work and I smelled him when I sat down to take off my shoes. I reached under the couch to get my house shoes and I pulled out his black Dunhills slipper instead. The way it felt light, weightless, made me throw it across the room, against Yolanda's bedroom door. From inside I heard her say, "Mama?"

She is in her nightgown, sitting on her bed, resting her back against the pillows, her thin arms crossed tightly over the hump of her stomach. She likes to sit like that, says she's hugging the baby. Barn is sitting right be-

side her smoking his pipe, his legs stretched out on top of the blanket. When the smoke curls from his nose, Yolanda fans it away with her hand.

"Byron says he might move in," she says, looking at him.

"You don't have the sense you was born with."

She takes her arms off her stomach and says, "I thought you'd be pleased."

"Why do I want that boy here? I already got a child messing up my life."

"Why do you think?" She's getting hot now. "My baby will have a father. Byron's here." She looks at Barn like he is her salvation.

"Where's the baby's father been up till now?"

"The baby hasn't been born yet. And you don't have to talk about Byron like he's not here."

I look right in those grey eyes and I say, "All right. You answer the question. Where you been all these months Yolanda been pregnant?"

Barn puts his pipe in the green bubble glass ashtray my mama gave me when she died. It's the only thing I have left of her. He's laid it on the blanket beside him.

"I realize you don't like me . . . " he starts up.

"Boy, it don't matter if I like you or not. You don't put food on my table."

"And I know you think I'm too young to take care of Yolanda."

"You got that right," I say. "Little fourteen-year-old I-dont-know-what . . . "

"I'm fifteen now. And you think I don't know how to be a good father."

"Well, you seem to know all about what I'm thinking." I cross my arms and stand over the bed, right on top of him. "Do you know how to be one? Doesn't look like it to me. Where you been for five months—on vacation? The Bahamas? It ain't been no Bahamas around here."

"I was home taking care of my family. No, let me finish. Just let me tell you something. I don't have a father and my mother left when I was twelve. Do you understand me? Nobody raised me. I raised myself and Nathan."

"Who's that?"

"My little brother."

"All by yourself?"

He nods his head.

"Well, how'd you manage with no Mama or Daddy?"

Then he looks like he ain't going to say no more. He reaches for his pipe, then change his mind. He looks at Yolanda giving him a message with her eyes to go on, tell it.

"Well, at first Mama's sister, Chickee, stayed with us. She even looked like Mama in some ways, like how she walked. Sometimes if I got

tired and wasn't paying attention, I thought she was Mama. Nathan was worse than me. He'd curl up on the couch with Chickee watching tv. Had his head in the crook of her leg, laying there till way past midnight. I'd have to half carry him to bed. And he never even knew she was passed out." He smooths his eyebrows with his finger.

Yolanda is looking at me to see if his words need embroidery, if he is getting through to me. I sit on his side of the bed. They scooch over to make room.

"What happened to Chickee? Where she go?"

He shrugs. "Wherever Mama and Daddy went."

I don't say anything. I don't have any answer for it.

He shakes his head. "I don't really care, either. They're not necessary to my life. I've already proved that. Chickee stayed about three months, then she said she had some important out-of-town business to take care of. She had on that old red knit dress she thought made her look cute, and wobbly high heels. She told me, "Y'all be fine. I have no doubt." I had to explain that to Nathan. Explain what was wrong with Mama and Chickee. I said they're a little mixed up. They'll be back later."

I don't know if he believes this or not. Can't tell by his face.

"After she left, we just stayed on in the apartment, pretending like she was there. That lasted about two weeks, then Mr. Winn came over and asked about the rent. Said it hadn't been paid in three months. What was I supposed to do about it? I got no job at twelve. And here's this okey-doke looking motherfucker handing me eviction papers. I almost went off on him.

"I got me a job that night catching for the dealer in my building. Everybody knows Marquis' doing business upstairs. All I had to do was hang around outside from nine to five in the morning. Somebody funny-looking come by, I tell Marquis. Or if I miss that and they get up to Marquis' apartment, then I go around back and wait at the bedroom window. Lots of hustling and shadows on the curtains, then the window scrapes open and out flies Marquis' duffle bag full of materials. I catch it and run."

"Barn, you going to get hurt doing that mess."

"It was a job, and it paid. That's all I cared about then. Now I'm looking for something more. I got my own business. Anyway, the point is I know how to take care of my family. Been doing it too long not to. I can take care of Yolanda and the baby, and I can take care of you, too."

And me too. Somebody wants to take care of me, too. Well, I kind of like that idea, except he tacks me on like he's adding another raggelly ribbon to the tail of his low-flying kite.

Barn and Yolanda are outside looking up into the grey sky, checking for thunderheads. They stand beside cardboard grocery boxes loaded up

with stuff from my house. Barn wants to take them to the new apartment, Yolanda wants to wait, says the rain will come down any minute. She has her hands on her hips, her face thrown backward. Her maternity blouse blows like laundry on a clothesline.

"One just hit me on the face!" she says to him and wipes her cheek with her finger. "See that? That is a raindrop." Barn, like a long tree branch, bends over to look.

I can't see her raindrop, but other drops hit the living room window and I know I am not going to move all this stuff now. The couch is sitting in the middle of the floor, waiting for us to carry it out the door, but I lay on it instead. That way I know it's not going nowhere.

Yolanda says Barn's new apartment is so fine it's got two bathrooms. She wants me to move out of this house, to stop working and stay with her and Barn. Be like a mother-in-law on tv. I said they'd have to get married first, but all right, since I owe it to her. I want to see my little girl happy just once. But I been thinking about it. I have to break my promise because I don't want to go.

Rain or shine I want to stay in my little old raggelly house. From way before Yolanda can remember, this has been my house. I saw the boarded-up windows and the condemned sign. I read the warnings posted on the front door. I paid the dollar it cost to take it off the owner's hands. I signed my name. I borrowed tools. I bought lumber. I stole bricks. I ripped out, tore apart, hauled away. I hammered and plastered and wired until they told me I could quit. The day the county inspector ripped the condemned papers off the door, he looked at me and Yolanda with unnatural pale eyes and said, "This is the worst thing you could have done. All the houses on this block are boarded up. You'll have rats for neighbors and that's all!" Yolanda buried her face between my legs. I pulled my hand out of my coat pocket and poked my middle finger at his back and told him, "I'm getting rid of the rats right now!" But he was already driving his truck off.

No, I don't want to move from here. This house is too much like me—used up. If I move away to a new apartment with old big square white rooms, where will I lay down?

Barn and Yolanda come in with a man wearing a maroon windbreaker splotched up with rain. The man says, "Yeah, I'm here for the couch and shit," and stands over me. "That it?"

"Yes," Barn says, "It makes out into a bed."

"How much you want?" He squats down and runs his skinny dark fingers along the fabric on the arms. "Looks kind of worn. Looks real worn. How much?"

Barn and Yolanda are standing there with this man, looking down at

me. Barn's mouth twists up ready to sell my couch.

"Not a cent," I say standing up. "This couch ain't for sale. What fool said it was?"

He looks at Barn. When he turns, the water on his kinky head drips down his neck.

"Look," he says to Barn, "I ain't here to waste time, yours or mine. This shit for sale or not?"

"My shit ain't for sale and never has been," I say. "Get out of my house."

He looks over at Barn and snorts. Before he goes out the door, he bumps into Barn and whispers, too loud, "Boy, you shoulda asked your Mama first." Barn don't answer, his eyes don't flicker, his lips don't twitch.

As soon as that man is out the door, Barn and me will talk. I got things to say about how no fifteen-year-old-little-something can sell my furniture out from under my behind. How I don't need a new apartment—I got me a house. How I don't need him—I already had a man once. How I'm not moving nowhere. Ever.

But Barn don't wait around to talk. He pulls on Yolanda's hand and they both walk out to his car, rain hitting their heads, their shoulders. Yolanda's blouse sticks to her back and I see the sharp edges of her shoulder blades. They both know they will catch their death of cold, but they go on like you can't tell them nothing. They get in his new Mercedes and it pulls off.

Once Yolanda yelled at me, "Mama, I am my worst self around you!" And I said, "Girl, you know it don't take no special occasion for you to act a fool." But I'm sorry I said it, and if I could take it back, I would. I see Yolanda like a voodoo doll—full of needles. If I could, I'd pull them out one by one, but wouldn't that hurt her too? Maybe once you got a curse put on you, the best thing is to just go on out and do your magic.

Yolanda is on her hands and knees crawling across the labour room floor. She says she can take the pain better that way. First she crawls forward, screaming the whole way, then she crawls backward. That's harder—she can't see what's behind her. Nurses are looking at her through the open door like they think she's crazy.

"Yolanda," I say. "Why don't you let me help you get in the bed? You going to wear that baby out."

She sits in a heap, legs splayed out in front, her hospital togs open in the back. "Oh, Mama," she says, and I can hear all the weary in her voice, "I can't stand this. How long do I have before the next one?"

I look at the clock over her bed. "Look like forty-five seconds."

"Oh shit." She puts her head in her hands.

"Why don't you go back to bed? You feel better if your stomach don't hang down so far."

"No, I feel better this way, when the baby hangs out. Like it's just part of me, not all of me. How many seconds?"

"Five," I say. "Four, three..."

"Oh, Mama, don't be funny. I don't have time to laugh right now." She gets back up on her hands and knees.

The nurses come in and out. They pick Yolanda up off the floor, get her back in the bed. They strap a monitor around her stomach. Later, they take her to the delivery room. I say I'm the labour coach, so they let me come too.

And where is Barn? I'm thinking this when I stand beside Yolanda at the delivery table holding her hand. She's gripping me like she ain't got nobody else. I tell her to pant, blow, *push*. I pant with her until I get light-headed. We're together like that, me trying to help deliver this baby, her trying to push it out. I'm thinking things are so different now. I was asleep when Yolanda was born. I didn't know nothing about panting, waiting, helping the baby come out in its own time, having to be patient with the birth. I guess I'm just surprised I didn't mess it all up myself.

Then here comes the baby's head, I see it shiny wet coming out between Yolanda's legs. She cries, says, "Help me, Mama. Help me." And I say, "Pant some more. Now *push*." I think about something I read in the Book of Questions: If two people you love are drowning, and you can only save one, who would you save? I just don't know.

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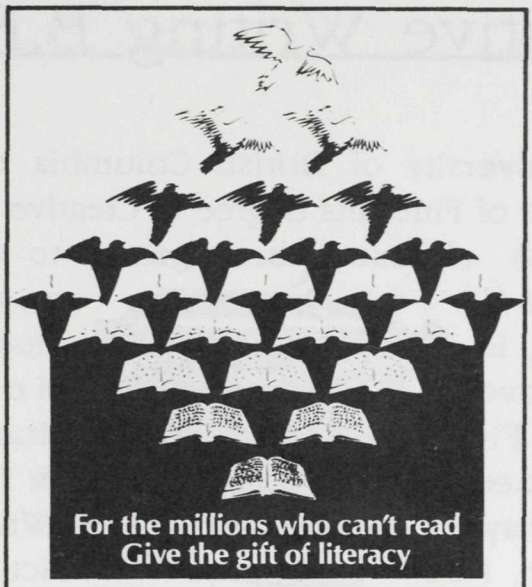

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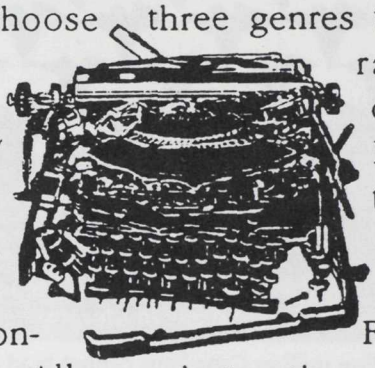

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