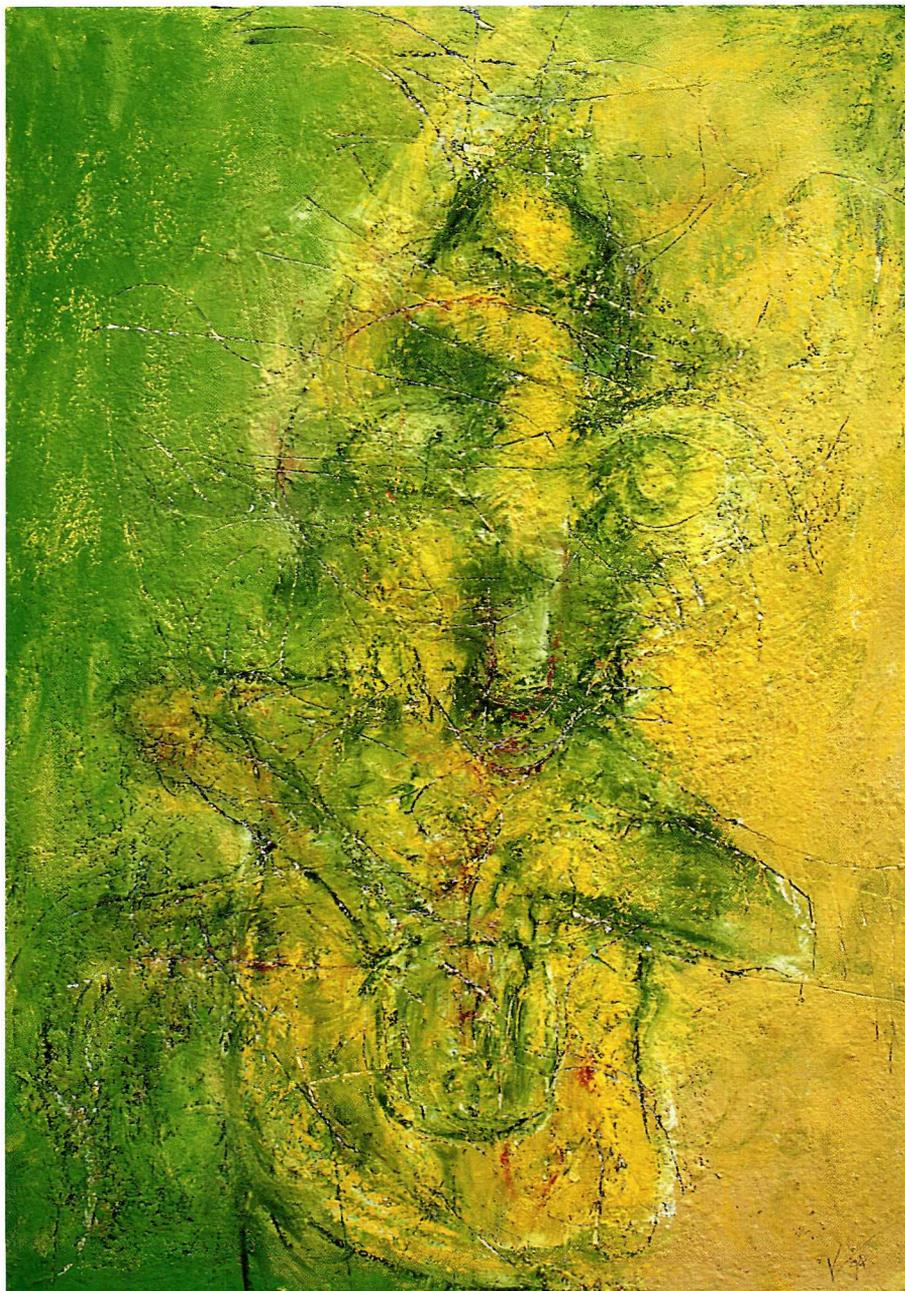


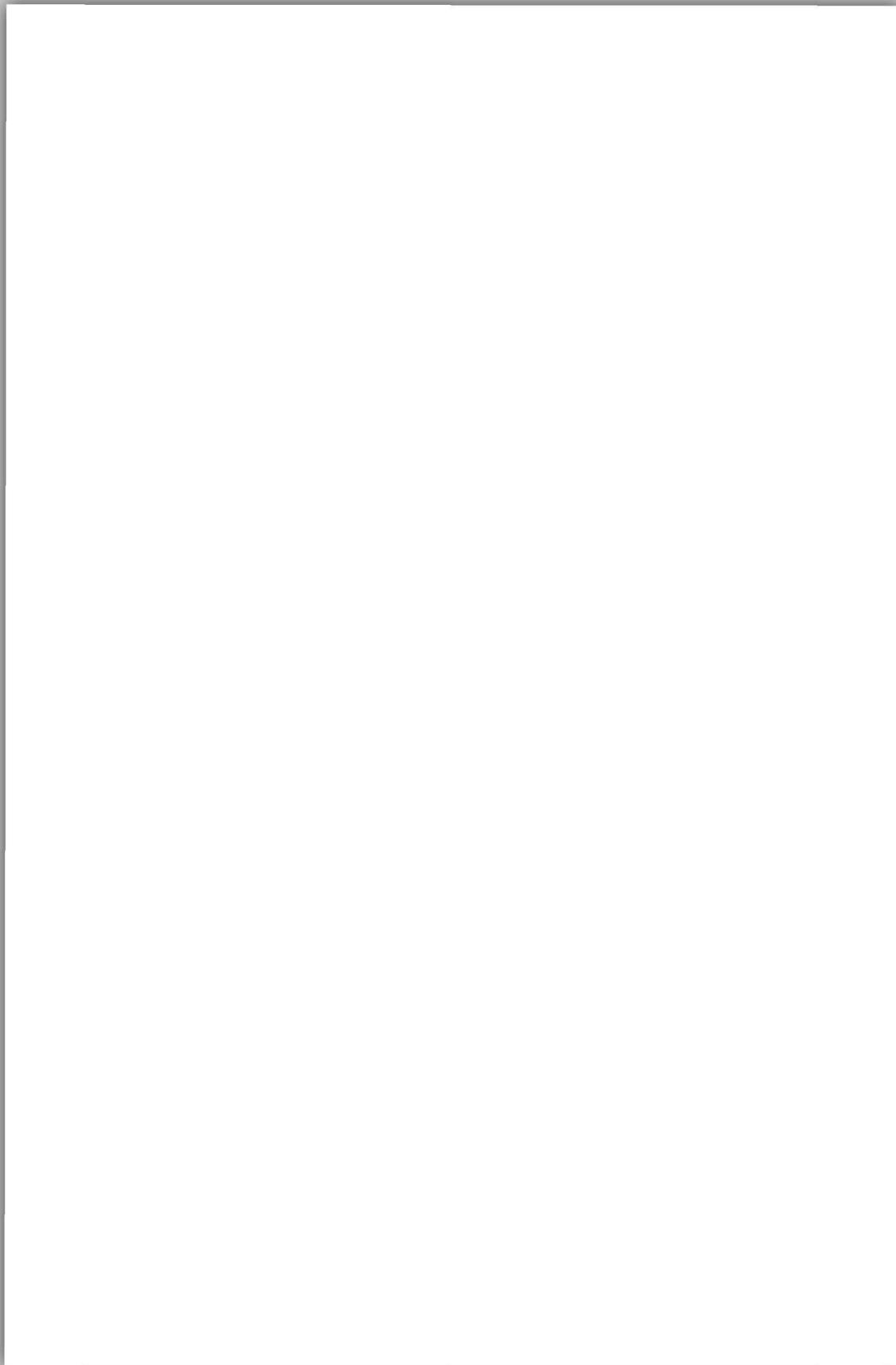
PRISM *international*

Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world

SPRING 1995
\$4.50 (plus G.S.T.)



1994 FICTION CONTEST WINNERS



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1995 SHORT FICTION CONTEST

**\$2000 FIRST PRIZE & 5 PRIZES OF \$200
PLUS PUBLICATION PAYMENT**

RULES

NOTE: Entries not conforming to the format outlined below will not be considered

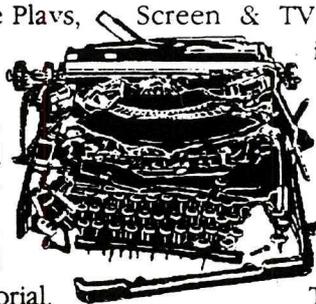
1. Entries must be **postmarked** no later than December 1, 1995.
2. Entries must be no longer than 25 pages typed, double-spaced, on 8 1/2 x 11 white paper.
3. To ensure the anonymity of the writer, the entrant's full name, address and the title of the story must appear on a **separate cover page**. The title of the story should appear on each page of the manuscript, but the author's name should not!
4. To enter **ONE** story will cost \$20 total. There is a \$15 one-time entry fee and a \$5 reading fee for each story submitted. Two stories will cost \$25 (\$15 + \$5 + \$5). There is no limit to the number of stories which may be entered. Entrants will receive a one year subscription to *PRISM international*. Current subscribers will receive a one year extension to their subscription. Please make cheques payable to *PRISM international*.
5. Entries must be original, unpublished material. It must not be under consideration elsewhere. It should be available for publication in a future issue of *PRISM international*. We will purchase First North American serial rights for all work accepted for publication.
6. Contest open to anyone except students or instructors in the Creative Writing Department at the University of British Columbia.
7. Works of translation are eligible.
8. **Entries will not be returned.** Winners will be notified by or before March, 1996 and published in the Spring Fiction Contest issue. SASE for list of winners only.

SEND ENTRIES TO: PRISM international / Dept. of Creative Writing / University of British Columbia / BUCH. E462-1866 MAIN MALL / Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z1

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Final Judge--To Be Announced

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All manuscripts should be sent to the Editors at the above address. We do not currently accept electronic submissions. Manuscripts must be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with Canadian stamps or International Reply Coupons. Manuscripts with insufficient postage will be held for six months and then discarded. The Advisory Editors are not responsible for individual selections, but for the magazine's overall mandate including continuity, quality, and budgetary obligations.

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1994 Prism Fiction Contest Winners

This year the top prize was split between two winners:

\$1100. Prize: Elise Levine, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
"Driving Men Mad (Scheherazade)"

\$1100. Prize: Michael Fox, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.
"New World Order"

\$200. Prize: Rick Maddocks, Simcoe, Ontario, Canada
"Lessons from the Sputnik Diner"

\$200. Prize: Norman Ravvin, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
"The Story of an Eye"

\$200. Prize: Jack Hodgins, Victoria, B.C., Canada
"Over Here"

\$200. Prize: Will Baer, Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A.
"Blood Noise"

1994 HONOURABLE MENTIONS:

Elise Levine, Canada "Testing, Testing"

Gloria Sawai, Canada "Haircut: A Story for Lent"

Steven Hayward, Canada "The Obituary of Philomeno Beviso"

Dana Tierney, Canada "The Wicker Basket"

Royston Tester, Canada "Dog in a Red Waistcoat"

There were 469 entries in the 1994 PRISM Short Fiction Contest. We received manuscripts from across North America and around the world. Our congratulations to the winners and our thanks to every writer who entered. Special thanks also to our judge, Mark Anthony Jarman, and our contest manager, Frank Borg.

That Extra Zero

Mark Anthony Jarman

At this point I could lie and say how harrowing and monstrous an ordeal it was to have to “judge” other writers, but I don’t want to put on the poor mouth or pretend to be too sensitive for words. The fact is it was FUN: I enjoyed the puny measure of power; I enjoyed the uncertainty; I enjoyed having to sign for the courier.

At my dining room table I studied all eleven stories, leaning on them to see what transpired, waiting for an epiphany. Their rank, their order—this shifted, like trying to nail down quicksilver. The order altered from day to day, hour to hour. Two stories, however, lingered at the top of each different list, twiggling something inexplicable in my head, some febrile tropism. I didn’t know the names then but one was Elise Levine’s “Driving Men Mad”; the other was Michael Fox’s “New World Order.” I tried sneaking up on them but they stayed true; I leaned on middle pages, random lines, and they took it. I sensed both had been well edited, each sentence, each word weighed.

1,2. 2,1. They slugged it out. I liked them both a lot. \$2000 versus \$200. That extra zero is a world of difference. I wanted to spread it around. *I began to wonder if I could reward them both.*

When I called Shelley Darjes at Prism she said she would run it by the editorial board. She called back quickly, saying I was the judge, it was my call. The more I thought about splitting the first prize, the more I was sure it was the right decision.

I don’t mean to ignore the other winners and honourable mentions. With all the stories I felt I was party to dispatches from clandestine cells all over the continent, privileged to see these amazing rearrangements of the same 26 letters, to eavesdrop like old Polonius behind the arras. “Lessons From The Sputnik Diner,” by Rick Maddocks, has verve and wit; it is a funny gumbo redolent of a smoky grill. And look at Norman Ravvin’s “The Story of an Eye”: this may sound strange but I admire its constricted nature; it has a dark claustrophobic beauty. It is straight-ahead realism yet it seems to unfold in another land where it’s hard to breathe. “Over Here,” by Jack Hodgins, is deft and convincing, colloquial and confident, with an undercurrent of tension and frustration. Will

Baer's "Blood Noise" has a terse x-ray sense of Pinteresque drama.

But 1 and 2. 2 and 1. "New World Order" and "Driving Men Mad" grabbed my sleeve, said "Me." There was nothing intellectual or mysterious about the process, though it was as random and arbitrary as any editing process. I just liked both stories and wished I had written them.

"New World Order" is smooth as milk, expansive, amused, and it demands elbow room. "Driving Men Mad" is more like a lyrical piece of sandpaper, chopped and channeled, its angular English turned inward but beautiful and resonant. Both pieces are sensuous and lush with their weird ways and surprises. Both are funny and serious at the same time, satirical and reverent. I admire the voice, the tone, the mood and precision, the right word, or, when it's needed, the wrong word, to keep you on your toes.

I've already gone on too long; the stories are what count. My congratulations to *all* the authors. My favourite song on the new Tragically Hip record has a line mentioning parasites thrashing in your blood. I hope these stories are something like that.

Driving Men Mad (Scheherazade)

Elise Levine

Tell me something, he says.
We have clematis. Alyssum. At one we nap. Drinks at three.
Her bathing suit is pink. Pink splash borders the pool.
He doesn't laugh.
We have a white porch, a swing. A ghost called Lady Jamais, famous
on the island. Nights calling in the garden, voice soft as water from the
sprinklers beneath the grass.
I say, I'm making this up as I go along.
Dogwood leaps, tongue and stem. I admire his arms. His smooth skin.
Lean against me, I say

She hooks a finger, two, a fist into me. Shouts, Bitch. You goddamned
bitch.

She's got these big eyes.
We've been together a long time. We're in love.

A woman lies on another woman. Lies and lies. A woman. A man. A
woman. Nothing I say can make it any better.

Tell me about yourself, he says.

All those Pre-Raphaelites pored over, first menstruation and its lusts.
We thought we were alone. We thought there were gardens. We thought
there was a ghost, unrequited lovers, we made one up and called her
Lady Jamais, death-burred, tragic as stars, tongue studded with sinking
moons.

I obsess over her breasts. Hips. Till death us do part. Teenage girls
are like this, better believe it. It is always a matter of life and death.

I visit her on the ninth floor, nomenclature of girl suicides: Ninth floor
please, psychiatric. At the nurses' station we ask permission to go to the
cafeteria where we load up on tiny bags of bite-sized Oreos, man we

work that vending machine as if playing pinball. She tells me she hides her pills under her tongue. Swallows fast. This is the kind of girl I really go for. Of course she's upbeat, you'd be too if you scarfed down a couple hundred of your mother's best Ativan, the happy drug of choice.

Make an effort, the nurses exhorted yesterday when she refused to attend the group session. Sounds like a bowel movement, she told them.

Bam-smang goes the cafeteria vending machine. Five bags, six bags. We've got five minutes left. Or else, the nurse had said.

We run out of quarters. We wait for the elevator with a bunch of old sick people. We take the stairs instead.

You're late, a nurse says.

I leave in the elevator. I'm carrying all these little bags. Do I toss them. Do I eat them and gain, like, a million pounds. I stand in the lobby. Life, I deduce, is complicated. Things will always, will only, get worse.

Not like this guy, I think, years later. He's simple. I lay him over and over. He's in shock, astonishment leaks from his fingertips, his toes, when I rub him down.

Then I eat him alive.

It's not like he has much money. None of us do. Money might make it easier. To go to Greece and fuck like mongrels. A scene of contrition in the Luxembourg Gardens. God, what I wouldn't give for a weekend in Winnipeg.

What he and I do instead is this: meet halfway, in Thunder Bay. The room's cold. We attract stares from locals. We're brave, we hold onto each other, drunk. I like your arms, I tell him in the lumpy bed.

He says, I like you too.

Tell me something, he says. We're on a bus. I hold my breath. Exhale. Pet dogs? Birthday parties? Other men. He's nervous asking about the women. What he really wants to know is so ordinary: does he stack up? I suspect he's jealous. I begin to credit him with being human. I am unspeakably cruel.

Tell me something.

In bed at his place I explete into his mouth. Nothing random in this: I shoot, I score. He's happy as a clam. He says he likes to finger fuck me. God, how many times do I have to tell him? Women *don't*, I say. They just fuck. Ah, his hand on my stomach. I can tell I'm not getting through. Women *fuck*, I say. He taps his index finger. Guys are too stupid sometimes. I do it—I use the *P-word*.

Phallogentric.

He rises on an elbow. He leans over me, he's hardly got any chest hair.

Christ, I'm hairier than he is, I think. He blows me a kiss.

I flip him the finger. Jerk.

I begin to suspect him of hidden depths.

You're losing your culture, she says. You're past the point. You're so far beyond. There's no telling what you'll do next.

I think, My life. It's like every *Gunsmoke* re-run I've ever seen.

We make up. She takes me dancing at Wild Bill's. A lesbian cultural evening. We two-step the night away. George Strait sings, "All my ex's live in Texas." She leads, we do an inside turn, one two three, five. We do the Cowboy Hustle, we do Slap Leather. I get confused, screw up the Grapevine. I sit down, finish an Ex. I watch her. She's good, women like dancing with her. Especially the straight feminists, her friends from the Crisis Line. Especially Barbara Ann, who won't let her go for four songs. Especially Jill, who finally cuts in. Hips. Pretty face. Quite the gal, I tell her in the washroom. Through the double doors and into the cubicle where I do up my jeans I hear Patty Loveless sing, "I got a jealous bone." She sings along, waiting for me by the sink. I slap open the cubicle door. Goddamn straight women, I say.

She says she wants to sleep with a man. She's woken me up, the street-light bleeds through the window. Give me some covers, I say. It's been ten years, she says. She says, I can drive men mad, I used to. I say, I know. I know.

She's asleep. I get up, get a glass of water. What will she think of next?

I come back to bed. The covers are on the floor. I leave them there, all night. In the morning her back is warm against my breasts.

She meets him at a playwright's conference. In Alberta. He's an alcoholic Newfie fag (I think), and he reads the part of a woman—brilliantly, she tells me, later. She has two vaginal orgasms with him, not clitoral, she says, knowing the distinction never fails to escape me. He beats off. He moans, I love you. That's what I think he said, she tells me. We laugh. She watches me carefully, for days.

I smell him on me sometimes. Sweat him, unavoidable. He's really there, I can't wipe him off, on my fingers, the sharp hairs of my legs.

One day we're walking to Mac's Milk.

We walk past Mr. Benjamin's shrubbery. Mr. Benjamin waves. What a nice day! On the other side of the street a woman in white shorts walks a Bouvier. We've seen her before, but not a lot, she's new to this neighbourhood. We agree we like Bouviers. We have so much in common. There's Mrs. Mathilde, home from Cuba. Hot, she says. Cuba was hot.

What a nice day! He says, Love me. I say, I won't. We stop in front of Mac's, neither of us reaches for the door handle. He says, So tell me something new.

He cries when he comes.

Once, when we're having sex, he mishears me say, I need you.

Of course on the home front things go from bad to worse. The stays of her bodice, her long silvery plaits of hair, undone. Oh God, I'm going to get it now.

She is spools and hooks of her weak heart. Her chest pains. She kisses my ear. I haven't got long, she says. I refuse to be threatened. I refuse to get close. She tongues fricatives into me. I'm afraid because I have no words for this.

It's bad, I think. I can't stop the lies.

I marry him; there are no children. I move back to the island with her; I never leave.

What do you want me to do? she says.

I've always liked how she smokes, even though I don't myself indulge. She's smoking now, white cigarette held lightly in her long beautiful fingers. She smokes strong, with emphasis. She's always scared me a little. She inhales. Taps the ash into the blue ashtray. The geraniums are doing fine. Exhales: I've always found it sexy, wanted to kiss it from her, like steam, I imagine. Nice lips. I like your lips, I say. It's not working, I won't get off this easy, not now. Nope. It's Ultimatum Time. The poplar whirs. Her eyes a muddy blue. I smile inappropriately, simpleton. I squirm, she makes me feel small. I, um, like your lips, I want to say. I want to say. Smoke rises and roils. Rises and rises. Forsythia flickers in the breeze and glows. What do you want me to do.

It's bad when the story repeats too often. When they get tired of the lies. When there's nothing more to be said. Off with her head! And look: Lady Jamais, headless in the garden. A flicker. A longing of sweet basil, summer savoury powders in the night air, words you can't hear but want to as she slips through the trees and into the swimming pool. She is the way roses look at night, bled of colour. She will never leave. This garden will flourish. She will slip past the cherry tree and into the sky. Fall down in a shower of star-dust. Rhododendrons applaud. Impatiens, their fierce pink, spread.

I can do this, I think, I can go on and on, who's to stop me?

Oh yeah, he says. I've heard that one before.

Elva Macías

De Capricornio

Tú me cuidas,
no quieres que junte guijarros
en el acantilado,
que corone de cardos mis trenzas,
que me alimente de ortigas.
Ne quieres que cuide alimañas,
temes que levite encima del tejado.
Pero puedes descifrar cartografías de cenizas
en mis faldas.
Sabes de telas de araña que curan heridas
en mi bajo vientre.
Has visto el hilillo de sangre
que brota del índice de mi corazón
cuando escribo.

Te has dado cuenta.
Nuestros ojos duerman entonces
en diferentes equinoccios.

translated by Caroline J. Davis

Of Capricorn

You look after me,
you don't want me to lay cobblestones
into a steep hill,
to crown my braids with thorns,
feed on nettles.
You don't want me to breed pests,
you dread climbing to the roof.
But you can trace the ash mapped
in my skirts.
You know about spider webs
that can heal wounds
low in my belly.
You have seen the thin thread of blood
that flows from the index finger of my heart
when I write.

So you realize.
Our eyes slip off to sleep
in a different equinox.

New World Order

Michael Fox

The new waitress, when she got it that I would be regular for lunch, I guess to amuse herself, she began to tell me things. I could see she knew I liked her, the way she felt free to talk. She was blonde and comfortable looking, with soft creamy skin and her hair falling out from under the little cap they all wear. She warmed my coffee as long as I sat there listening. In the meantime, she cooked up these little lies that were funny—what I took to be lies anyway, what I thought were funny.

The Kalico Kitchen is where I take my break. It's a diner out by the highway, not a busy place during the day. The Country Girl, right downtown, is more popular and I'm told the food is better, but I prefer to get away from the bakery and crowds. I drive gently out to the highway, relaxing as I go. I drive slowly and carefully, making perfect turns. With these perfect turns, I'm carving what's in front of me with the nose of the car. That's control and grace, a small offering of it in my world.

The lot is almost always empty at three, which is when I get my break. The Kalico is the place where the truckers stop, since it's the only all-night this stretch of 91. In the daytime you figure half the world has passed through there, the lot is a mud pit. But I come in when it's quiet. The machines behind the counter hum and there's the clock on the wall that ticks, it's a wind-up, not an electric. In the back, Phil flips your burger and listens to his radio talk shows. The door opens and little bells tinkle, some road-tired flatlanders come in and Marilyn—that's the waitress's name—sets out coffee.

On a particularly slow day after the war started, the little bells on the door hadn't chimed in fifteen minutes. Phil was sitting slumped in the back with the radio tuned for an update and I was probably frowning. Marilyn came around the counter and kindly took a stool next to me, and that's when we got into the whole Robbinsville story. This was a longer, bigger story than the others, I guessed, from the way she paused before beginning, as though it were the telling of something she didn't know the end of yet.

"Not far from here," she said, waving her hand sort of north-northeast towards Springfield, "up in the woods in Robbinsville, that's where I

grew up. There's this family, the Robbinses. You heard about them?" I shook my head. "Well, you'll just have to take my word for it, then. They're giants." She paused, looking at me straight and steady as I drank my coffee. When I didn't react, she turned to look out on the mud lot. "Big men and big, big women."

She got up to give an idea. She was tall herself, a little heavy. And standing on the tips of her toes, alongside the empty counter, she raised a phone book on her fingers toward the ceiling; she hunched her shoulders and scowled: this was one of the men. For the women she inflated her cheeks, held out her arms as though hefting a rain barrel and shifted from foot to foot. I laughed. Watching her cut up was better than I'd have expected.

"The Robbinses own the town," Marilyn said. Phil stuck my plate through the window and she set it on the counter in front of me. "They own the shops, the shopkeepers, and everyone else. My whole family works for them. All our neighbours. It's like a plantation the way they run things."

From what else Marilyn said, I learned that they were logging people and that Robbinsville was a logging town. They had their own sawmill and shipping operation, and she used words like *bullbuck* and *singlejack*, which were all Greek to me. She went on to describe the logging camps and the loggers, a breed of men she seemed to know something about. My burger on this occasion was particularly good and I laid into it fast as Marilyn talked.

"Biggest trees this side of the divide," she told me, but this time getting a little grand with her tale. "You and I couldn't touch hands 'round even the smallest of them." She was talking about virgin timber and there's none of that anymore. It's all gone and second growth doesn't get that big here.

Complete fabrication was all it was, details about logging or no. I'd grown up in this area and unless I'd lost my memory there was no such town. I'd never seen Marilyn down in the valley before and I can recall everyone from my grade school and most everyone from Manchester too. She was from away off somewhere else—I figured Canada. Maybe that's how far her little wave extended, way up north. Anyway, I knew she was making it up and I didn't mind. I even liked it, the silliness of it.

But then I was done with the fries and coleslaw and my break was up. I got out my wallet.

"I'll fill you in on the rest tomorrow. There's more. You coming in?"

I looked at her. "Now don't I come in every day, Marilyn?"

"Do you?" She smiled slyly. She took my money and turned to the register. "I wasn't aware."

At the bakery, Hal had his arm to the elbow mixing in the sourdough starter and he was making a face. I took a look in the rack oven where baguettes were rotating.

"They come out a quarter after. The next rack needs slashing."

I put my apron back on, took the rack out of the proofer, pulled it around close to the oven and started with the razor down the trays. The baguettes were over-proofed and had formed a dead skin, but I kept quiet. Hal's young and something of a hothead. He hates making mistakes, or hates to be told. I zapped the worst of them with a spray bottle, which Hal saw me doing, so he knew. We'd see how over-proofed they were when they came out of the oven. Baking is certain that way: it's unforgiving.

"Jesus, I hate this shit," Hal said. He was on his knees on the floor refreshing the sourdough starter bucket. He was running his finger through the goop and making another bad face. "You ever think these are like tiny creatures?"

"That's what they are," I said. "Yeast is alive."

"Yeah, it's alive, this white glop is alive, and I'm sticking my *arm* down in there, messing around in this village, *this civilization*. I think it's creepy as shit."

Hal stood, his arm dripping the starter that now looked proper and like pancake batter. He scraped the coating off his arm into the bucket and carried this to the walk-in. When he came out he stood watching as I finished slashing the baguettes, cleaning his hand with a towel.

"You ever think that it's like *watching* you? We're like, *hum-de-dum, time to refresh the starter*, and meanwhile it's watching you all beady-eyed and shit. Little yeasts have gotten together over the years and formed Poppa! And *Poppa* is just waiting for his chance. Like, *Retard me one more time motherfucker . . .*"

I gestured to Hal to open the rack oven as I slipped on the mitts. I pulled out the old and shoved in the new, the blast of heat in my face. I watched the first rotation through the window and gave them a shot of steam.

There was a rap of knuckles on the roll door. Hal jumped to the window. "Flour man. I'm out of here. I'm on my break."

Hal headed for the bathroom, leaving me to unload alone, and I unlatched and pulled up the roll door. There was Pete, smiling, his arms crossed. Pete and I were at State U together and we're usually glad to see each other. He makes Hal nervous, but then a lot of things make Hal nervous. But today we got right into the order, unusually business-like. I asked for extra, a total of sixteen sacks of the unbleached and twelve of the hard red winter.

“No problem,” Pete said. I looked up, surprised. Changes in the order usually give him an excuse and he’ll go off on you. He likes to pretend that his customers abuse him. I was about to ask what had come over him when someone else rounded the side of the truck.

It was a man, or a boy, even—of the male species, in other words—but a giant, and not some sort of Neanderthal. He was perfectly normal looking, but just about a foot and a half taller than myself and twice as broad. He unlatched the truck’s cargo door and rolled it up, then hopped nimbly up onto the bed. The truck dipped in a dead bounce under his weight.

I looked at Pete who was watching me and smiling. “Meet my assistant, Lonny. Lonny this is Joe. Joe Stalin.”

That’s not my last name, but the kid didn’t seem to get the joke, just smiled from the truck bed and waved. Then he picked up two of the big unbleached sacks, one in each hand. He piled them at the edge of the bed for off-loading like they were nothing much. One of those sacks by itself gives me trouble, so I watched him as Pete stood by with his arms folded.

“The kid’s from up north, grew up in the woods. Doesn’t know shit except logging.” Pete laughed. “The only name he recognized that I could think of was Dolly Parton.” Lonny began on the hard red winter sacks, which are smaller, and these he carried four at a time, two in each fist. “He sings really sweet, too. Knows all kinds of songs I’ve never heard. He’s not stupid.”

The way Pete said this, kind of wistfully, made me turn to look at him. He coughed into his fist. “Yeah, so you’re Stalin, and I think Benito will be good for Bob over there at Il Fornaio. What do you think?”

“Benito?”

“Mussolini. *Il Duce*.”

The kid hopped down from the bed and two at a time toted the big ones on his shoulder into the flour room. A hundred pounds each. He made this look easy.

“Bob might not like that, Pete. Being Italian . . .”

“So? You don’t mind being Stalin, right?”

“Well, I’m not really Russian.” The bakery specializes in a few Russian-style items—black bread, knishes and what not—but none of us come from Russia.

Pete thought about this as Lonny finished up the job. Then the three of us went over to the counter, where I bagged up whatever they chose. That’s part of our arrangement with delivery people. Pete took a few baguettes as usual. Lonny, ducking to avoid the hanging overheads, chose some knishes. When I put three in a bag, Pete cocked an eyebrow at me, signalling that three knishes would drop like pebbles into Lonny, who was standing there big as a mountain, so I put in four more.

“Hey, thanks a lot Mr. Stalin,” Lonny said. He was a polite kid, and pronounced what wasn’t my name just the way Pete had said it. He popped out to the truck and Pete took me by the arm.

“The way I look at it, we’re giving him a little history, a little education. You know? The world today is so goddamn new all the time, what’s history? This way, when the kid finally reads a book, he’ll see Stalin, Mussolini, Genghis Khan, and he’ll think, gee, I met someone with that name, maybe this applies to me. You know? It’ll be part of his world now, along with Dolly Parton.”

We went out and Pete got in the truck. Beyond him, Lonny was hunched down in the passenger seat, but his head was still touching the top of the cab. On the antenna a little flag was waving—red, white and blue. There were flags everywhere these days, but seeing one on Pete’s truck made me particularly sad. The mania was touching everyone. I turned away, trying to picture Dolly Parton in Lonny’s imagination, dancing now with Stalin, now with Mussolini.

“Genghis Khan?” I said. At this moment, when all the work was done for sure, Hal showed up and stood in the door.

Pete started up the truck and winked. “Yeah, you know Genghis. Down in Manchester, at the Golden Dragon.”

Hal hadn’t understood what Pete said, but it didn’t concern him. He was bopping on one knee, smoking fast, looking left and then right. The kid was wired, I was sure; that stuff about the starter had been one thing, but now he was looking like he could fly if I asked him to. I thought I’d expand his education according to Pete’s method.

“Pete says there’s new management at the Four Columns. I guess McWilliams cashed it in; guy name of Amin, Idi Amin.”

Hal took a drag and looked me in the eye. “Yeah, so?”

“So nothing.”

“Is that Italian? They want to change their order? I make a mean foccacia, nothing to it.”

The next afternoon on my break I drove out to the diner as usual. The flags in every driveway were snapping in the wind like teeth and I had to think about the poor slobs we were smart-bombing now in some ancient civilization on the other side of the world. This upset my drive and I found I couldn’t concentrate on my carving of air. Too much red, white and blue flak to each side. I gave up, accelerated and took the turns out to the Interstate haphazardly, participating in the general sloppiness of everything and feeling the worse for it.

There was only one car in the lot and Marilyn was giving the guy his bill when I came in. I sat a ways down the counter and ordered my usual.

Marilyn thought I should have the soup, so she brought me some, Chicken and Stars. She slid the bowl across to me and said in a low voice, "You know those people I was telling you about, the Robbinses?"

"Uh huh," I said. The soup was hot, so I let it sit.

"Well, they're all dead. I just heard." With a little nod she indicated the man down the counter.

Marilyn's eyes were half-lidded like she was determined to be casual, but her voice was low and tense. I was beginning to see Marilyn couldn't swing keeping any of her big ideas or fibs under her belt. Once it came to her, she had to get it out. She couldn't wait.

I smiled. "Dead?"

"Well, not all of them—just the main ones—Ma Robbins and her brothers. Most of the sons are off fighting." I looked down the counter. She'd given the man his check, but he was still sitting there with his coffee. He knew we were looking at him but he didn't turn. He was an old guy with a mild expression, who looked like a milkman to me, but I guessed he was the only informant available for her purposes.

I lowered my voice to imitate Marilyn's. "Well how'd that happen?"

"At the town meeting. All the bigwigs on the stage up there. Ma Robbins and her brothers, running the town. And somebody"—here Marilyn began to laugh—"somebody came along and dropped the roof on them." She giggled and slapped one hand against the other. "Splat, you know? Just like that."

She had an explanation for how this had happened, how the meeting hall was undergoing new foundation construction, and how someone took advantage of this. I got the gist. The deaths were not considered in the realm of bad news to the local inhabitants and they weren't to her either. When her story was done, we didn't dawdle over condolences. I shrugged and spooned up my soup and she brought me my burger. From the kitchen I could hear the whistle of rockets behind a droning voice.

"Can you imagine?" Marilyn asked. "The man who knocked the hall down must be huge, like a house himself."

In a little bit, she brought me pie and coffee. I hadn't ordered pie but she brought it to me anyway, a reflex on her part. The truckers went through twenty to twenty-five pies a week. Mostly cream pies—chocolate and banana and coconut cream, but also a lot of apple and cherry. She set the pie down and looked out through the diner windows with a hard-eyed squint. "My brother was big like that—the one that died. That's probably where I get it from. I'm kind of over-impressed by large men. This guy that pushed over the meeting house—I'd love to meet him." She looked at me as I took a bite. "But I guess running south doesn't make sense when Canada's right there, huh?"

“Well,” I said, and I kind of sniffed, looking down modestly and thinking about what she’d said about her brother, “actually that was me.”

“What was you?”

“The guy that dropped the roof. That was me.”

“No.” Her mouth formed a little O of disbelief.

I hadn’t planned on saying this and right then I didn’t know why I had. I didn’t have my story together at all. I couldn’t imagine the unheard-of lies required to make me the man who knocked a house down and killed a race of giants. But I kept thinking it would be nice to go home with Marilyn and I was just going for it, keeping up to her story with my own. That’s the way it was because I was already going home with her for good in my head. I would start afresh in life and love her in a good way. I had that much figured out about Marilyn and me. What else was needed? That’s how I looked at it.

So I made up a bunch of stuff about foundation support beams wedged with little blocks, and me and my sledgehammer, the rescuing of people in the auditorium, freedom fighters aiding my escape, and so on.

“Anyway, it wasn’t all of them,” I added, taking another risk. “That’s just rumour. I happen to know Lonny made it out, for one. He’s working down here now.”

Marilyn dismissed the name with a wave. “Lonny’s just one of the cousins anyhow. He wasn’t in it with Ma to begin with.”

I shrugged. I was pleased with the quickness of my interjection, but I was also abruptly aware that some part of Marilyn’s story now appeared to be true. She stared at me with her elbows on the counter and a kind of funny frozen smile. “You didn’t,” she said finally.

“I did. That was me.” I said this, but I didn’t want to be saying it. Already the lie was making me uncomfortable. I ate my pie faster now, in a sudden hurry.

The old guy down the counter stood and waved to Marilyn. “Left it on the counter,” he said.

Marilyn watched him as he left, then went slowly down the aisle and returned with the money. She looked at me warmly and soft-eyed, like she was sorry. “You shouldn’t have said that.”

“Said what?”

“What you said.” She held her forehead in her hand, looking down. Seeing her that way, her concern, my heart kind of squeezed. “Some of those Robbins boys,” she said, “they’ll be coming back, and then they’re gonna come looking . . .”

“I’m not a lumberjack,” I said, interrupting her.

She looked at me sadly. I didn’t care then about the Robbinses, I was asking her out.

"I'm not a lumberjack," I repeated. "But maybe you'd have a date with me tonight anyway."

She smiled. "Is this a hero's last request?"

"It's a request, but I don't think it's my last."

Marilyn leaned her elbows on the counter, closer to me. I could smell her mildly sweet scent. "I can grant that request," she said. "What else?"

"How about some more coffee?"

After work, until the time when Marilyn got off, I drove along the strip mall getting together a new costume for myself, as well as a haircut. And I brought a couple of different loaves from the bakery and a pretty coloured package of hard candy for her. At the appointed hour, I drove to the restaurant and waited for her in my truck. I watched through the diner windows as she finished up and untied her apron. She disappeared in the back as the other waitress, an older woman named Maude who came in for the dinner shift, set up ketchup bottles for refilling. Then Marilyn trotted out of the back, swinging a black leather jacket over her shoulder. The two women raised their hands to each other, each saying something that made the other laugh. There were a few customers at the counter and they waved her good-bye, too.

"Geez," Marilyn said as she climbed in the passenger side. "I hardly recognize you."

"It's the moustache," I said.

"Yeah, wow. Is that real?"

Looking in the rearview mirror, I gently brushed with my fingertips to the left and the right of the part. It was a thick, black, brushy thing that made me look like Hussein, the designated enemy of the moment. "No. I just put it on sometimes."

"On special occasions?"

"That's it. Sometimes like a tie, when I want to get spruced up, or when I need to go incognito. Tonight I'm wearing it for both reasons. Do you like it?"

She did, and she said she was honoured, and I gave her the candy. The cellophane wrapping rustled and squeaked in my nervous hands like a mouse in its nest. She made another O with her mouth and then smiled. After giving her the candy, I tried to control the shaking of my hands by keeping them on the steering wheel.

We drove out of town to La Fiesta and during dinner Marilyn told me in detail about everything bad that had ever happened to her. Over beers, a tornado destroyed their house and killed her dad when she was just a little girl. But they hadn't moved then, apparently. They'd set up a tent house in the foundation. This sounded almost as bad as the tornado itself,

because the neighbourhood hadn't been nice about the tent. To make ends meet, her mother began to entertain gentleman callers and at school they started calling her names. Over more beers, she told me that a bus ran over her dog that same year. The dog had gone crazy with the tornado and with living in the tent and just chased cars all the time. Marilyn said the bus struck him and went over him with a bump and kept right on going.

When our burritos came, her brother, much later, was killed by two other soldiers in his platoon. There was a lot more to this story, but she wasn't telling and I didn't ask. He was the son of one of those Robbinses, conceived after the tornado and so big he almost killed her mom coming out. We discussed this for a while and who the father might be. As I was finishing her burrito, Marilyn said that nowadays her mom and step-dad lived in the trailer next to hers, drinking away the dead boy's pension.

Throughout this listing of every bad thing and then some, Marilyn smiled and described each detail with relish. "It's shell shock," she explained. "Aren't they just terrible stories?"

"Awful," I said, and smiled along with her.

"And you? What are your stories?"

"None," I lied. "Besides recent events, what I've told you about, of course."

"None? I don't believe it. You're fibbing me."

"Really not. A very mild existence." I enjoyed the crestfallen look on her face. But it was true. I don't have any brothers or sisters who might have died in mysterious circumstances. And, as for disasters, I've had less than my share. So telling it shortly, I described the simple and loving childhood I'd had with my parents. They had been good people. I'd had my problems with them, but, in the end, the problems weren't what I remembered and it felt better to take the bigger view. They died a few years back, peacefully, in their sleep. With the same sort of relish Marilyn had given her disasters, I now told her of the placid beauties, as I call them: the small but deep satisfactions of lives lived quietly but well, the quiet passings of my parents and others in our community that turned out to have a resounding echo. Summarizing and airily sticking to the highlights, I described for Marilyn my successes in school, being elected class president and being valedictorian at my graduation. I was quarterback on the most successful high school football team in state history and because of this I got a football scholarship to the U. I knew I wanted to be a baker and take over the family business, and that's what I'd been doing ever since graduation, and pretty happily too. This was all true, if hugely sanitized for effect. For some time now I'd been having a bad time of it, long, low years for no better reason I could think of than that people

killed each other for nothing, just because they could, and the world was going to hell. But I skipped any description of this, allowing the rosy glow of a life without incident to stand.

Marilyn was awestruck and incredulous. She had been chewing on a corner of her balled-up napkin and now she threw it on the floor. "That's the worst story I've ever heard. I've never even imagined anything like it. . . ."

"Happy but true," I admitted.

"That sort of life could delude you into thinking there was order in the world, or justice, or fair rewards for fair service. . . ."

"But isn't there? Isn't there order in the world?" I gave her a little smile. "I think there is."

Marilyn looked at me now in a new way, as though she'd encountered something un-dreamed of and precious. Then she smiled, and shook her finger at me, right in my face. "Too much," she said. "You went too far, too far. You had me going though, you had me going."

I drove Marilyn home to the trailer park where she lived, taking it slow. We were feeling pretty good and I began to do my thing, to carve the air in front of the truck.

Marilyn sat back with her head against the rest. "You drive nicely," she said. And in a way, of course, that was that. The fact that she had noticed, and could appreciate a little thing, meant that I was hers, probably for good, even if she never said another nice thing to me.

The trailers lay alongside the highway, off the access road. Over the entrance was a brand new arching sign supported by columns: Ponderosa Park. As we nosed along the rutted dirt lane, she pointed out in the jumping headlights which one belonged to her, a white trailer sided with a blue band and a little yard filled with shrubs, and we parked in front. I went around to her door, wondering would she invite me in, but Marilyn took my hand and led me right into the trailer next door.

"Ma! Look what I've brought home."

I hadn't expected to meet her folks, and, for a minute, it wasn't clear that I would. For one thing, we were standing in darkness, and it seemed to be an empty trailer. We stood at one end of a dark, narrow room that smelled sharply of ashes. Then out of the blackness stepped a small elderly woman and I almost jumped. Marilyn took my hand as the old woman flipped on a light. The top of her head came just up to my chin. Squinting, her face was as patterned as a sponge.

"Ma," Marilyn said, "you remember the one I was telling you about, who said that stuff about the Robbinses?" Ma nodded and Marilyn hitched her thumb at me.

Marilyn's mother gave me a long looking over, while I thought about disclaiming the whole thing. I was looking at her, too, the way her hair lay thin on her head, with spots of baldness. Her house dress was dirty and hung off her like a bag. And when she stepped up close to me, I could smell blackberry brandy. Claspng my elbows in her little hands, she pressed her papery, powdered face to my chest. "Oh, it's so good to see you again, son," the old woman said.

Marilyn gave me a nudge.

Now, I thought, perhaps there were moments with Marilyn I could look back to—things she had said, or maybe moments with other people—that might tell me what the right thing was to do here, right here and now, but I couldn't think of anything. The son was dead, but she called me son. And maybe I had thought before that the whole kit and caboodle was Marilyn's lies, but now here we were in a trailer with someone she called Ma, and Marilyn was nudging me and smiling. It was a little gamey smile, challenging me, so that's what I went with. "Well, Ma," I said hesitantly. "It's been a long time."

Mother stepped back and looked at me quizzically. In the corners of her eyes there were tears, but her expression was fierce. "It hasn't been *that* long," she said. She pushed off from me like a little sailboat and, kind of drifting, tacked back into the room's dark end. As Marilyn pulled me along after her, my eyes began to adjust to the dark. A small man watching television became visible in the dimness at the far end of the room. He did not look up from his program, which was professional wrestling. The sound of the crowd hissed like gas escaping into the room.

"Mary-lynn," Mother warbled from an enormous lounge in which she sat like a little girl. "Tell that boy of ours we received some mail for him just the other day."

We were standing by a coffee table, and Marilyn turned to me and, with some irony in her expression, dutifully repeated what Mother had said. At this the small man craned around in his seat. He had one of those little faces you sometimes see but don't want to look at, a face too little for the size of his head. He looked like an infant with five o'clock shadow, and his expression was perky and smiling.

Marilyn whispered to me that the little man's name was Jim, and we settled down on the couch. Mother sat facing us from the lounge in the corner, and Jim was on our right with his back to us, watching the television.

There was a partially opened box sitting on the couch next to me. Not knowing where to park my eyes, I looked at it while Marilyn gave my hand an encouraging squeeze. I wondered if she understood what was going on, and whether we were going to laugh about it later. I also

wondered whether this play-acting was what she did with all her dates. I would have liked to know some basic things. Her brother had been in the military. And, obviously, when soldiers get killed, the military replaces them, however many. Replacements slip into place like cartridges, click click click. But the families back home have a hole blown through their middle, an absence they have to keep looking at. I thought that Marilyn's old mother might have her eye on that hole, and that this was what we might be doing here, trying to patch things up. I would have asked Marilyn except that Mother was watching us closely.

"Mary-lynn," she called now from the corner. "Tell that boy of ours he can open it up, anytime he likes."

I answered that if they didn't mind I'd wait until tomorrow dinner—how in my family we always opened gifts at dinner time and how I'd always liked this tradition.

"No." Marilyn cut me off. "This isn't your birthday," she said, stating a fact. She reached over my knees, pressing her breasts across my thighs, and pulled the box up onto my lap. The package, I noticed, didn't look like anything that had come through the mail. The box was white and clean and the flaps were without tape.

Inside I could see some plastic and cards and items all a-tumble, and I had to put both my hands in there to sort it all out. Expecting a practical joke, over which we would all laugh, my fingers went in gingerly. I expected a sudden pain.

But the cards were wrestling cards, showing beefy men in leotards. Some of them were marked with a pen, the figures of the wrestlers drawn over with childish adoration. I arranged them together, examining each one, and put them on the sofa beside me. As I was doing this, Marilyn and her mother discussed the rally that Mother and Jim had gone to. It was George Bush this and George Bush that, what a surprisingly tall man, what a strong man and so on. At this moment I was glad to keep my mouth shut as I examined all the cards.

Then I pulled out one of the plastic objects. I almost put it back in the box when I saw what it was: a plastic penis, a dildo, anatomically correct, a little outsized. Marilyn smiled and nodded at me.

I held the dildo up. There was a rotating dial at the base. It was one of the vibrating kind and, when I turned it on, it made a noise like an electric shaver buzzing in the dark of the trailer. When it buzzed like that, Mother said: "Ah-hah!" This confirmed something for her, I guess. What she had long suspected. Her "Ah-hah!" sounded old to me; she wasn't really surprised and I was pretty sure by now that I wasn't the first to be seeing these things and pulling them out of the box for Mother.

Now Jim turned again from the television and stared at me fixedly, but

also without surprise. I looked at Marilyn. She was sitting beside me on one ham at the edge of the couch, facing me with a delighted smile. "Can you beat this?" she seemed to be asking.

I smiled at her in my confusion. "Is this yours?" I said, trying to make a joke. I felt I had to be up to this moment, that I was undergoing some test. Trusting in Marilyn's smile seemed like a light in the tunnel.

At my question, Jim, who had been so quiet to that point, jumped up red-faced and puffing, which only made his little face smaller. He got up close to me and bent right down, his face inches from mine, and shouted: "THA' T'AIN'T HERS you pansy sonofaBITCH! You ungrateful... THA'S YOURS, THA'S ALL OF IT YOURS!"

He glared hotly at me, shaking, his nostrils quivering and huffing. He was a little pip, but he had authority, and I didn't want to tangle with him. He saw this and backed off a bit, his eyes shifting from me to the box and back again while I kept my eyes on him. Working independently, my hands brought more dildos from the box. I held them up between my hands and Jim: they were long and short and of different colours, a surprising variety, more than I would have thought necessary.

When I had brought every dildo out and the box was empty, Marilyn, Jim and Mother stared at me, waiting.

"Well," I said, as straightforwardly as I could, "I thank you for keeping this safe for me. I do appreciate it."

Jim nodded grudgingly and went back to his seat. I began to put the dildos—there were six of them—back into the box. Marilyn helped me. I included the drawn-on wrestling cards for fear I'd seem ungrateful by leaving them out. Mother stared at us beady-eyed and tight-lipped from her corner, but I thought I could sense from her a grim approval of the way I was handling myself.

Marilyn sat beside me, quiet and thoughtful now, and I wondered if maybe she was thinking of what might be next for us. The Robbinses. I sensed that she was worried for me. I had a powerful impression at that moment of how she was worried, of how we were joined, and how I had to make things right. It was time for me to draw my own line in the sand—I had my vital interests now, something to defend—so I rose from the couch and helped Marilyn up. I closed the flaps of the box and put it under my arm. Mother and Jim looked at us from both sides, and their expressions, I thought, were beginning to slide towards a kindly understanding. They were sorry for us, but obviously relieved to have provided us with what help they could.

"Sure," I said, and winked at the two old people. "I'll put these to good use." I wiggled my fanny like a go-go dancer and at the same time gave Marilyn a good pinch on the inside of her arm.

“Owww!” she cried, as her folks laughed with approval at my joke. The mood between us now became warm and friendly, and Mother stood up and put her arm around me as she led us back to the front door. Under the hall light she was chuckling and squinting up into my eyes with affection.

As Marilyn and I stepped down into the yard for the end—or the beginning, I wasn’t sure yet—of our first date together, Mother asked from the doorstep: “Well now, aren’t you forgetting something?”

I looked at Marilyn, who in the dimness leaned toward my ear. I leaned in too, so that her lips brushed me, which made me shiver. “Give her a kiss,” she said.

“Well,” I said, swallowing. I handed Marilyn the box to hold and stepped back up onto the trailer steps, thinking that of course sons do kiss their mothers, it wasn’t unusual. A pair of sad old geraniums in pots flanked the door. I noticed these as I rose on the steps to take Mother by the shoulders. Jim was standing behind her in the shadows and looking at me sweetly, as though maybe he was also standing in line. But his turn wasn’t going to come, I decided. I leaned forward to give Mother a peck on the cheek, but she strained upwards and put her lips to mine. This was a shock, the last most unexpected thing, and I almost reacted badly. Her lips were waxy and squirmed like smooth insects; she was tiny between my hands and I felt for a moment I might lift her and pitch her right over the trailer. But since I’d become the brother, her son, the giant—however that had happened—only tenderness was going to protect her from the power of my size and strength.

“Oooh,” she said, swooning when I stepped down, “I just love big men. I can’t resist them.” She looked at me clear-eyed and laughed huskily.

I turned back to Marilyn where she was standing on the grass. She held the box of dildos high, covering her breasts. I came down from the trailer and took her by the elbow. I didn’t need to look at her to feel her approval: there was a warm glow between us as I led her at a stately pace over the grass to the door of her trailer. We turned back before going in, to wave goodnight to Mother and Jim, but they’d already shut their door. From the platform of Marilyn’s doorstep we faced the quiet trailer park. Beyond the security lights, it was dark up to the highway. The cars going past streaked like prize ribbons against the stars. I put my arm around her, feeling linked again with life for the first time in years, realizing I had tied myself to a territory and a whole new idea. I was only wondering how, if pressed, I would defend my new-found world.

Elva Macías

Al Borde del Camino de Li Tai Po

Bajo un árbol
el vino y mi corazón
se han embriagado uno del otro
y canto.

translated by Caroline J. Davis

Beside Li Tai Po Road

Under a tree
the wine and my heart
have gotten drunk on each other
and I sing.

Lessons from the Sputnik Diner

Rick Maddocks

*The sun comes up
in a coffee cup.*
—Lyle Lovett

I learned about death in the kitchen. From the flies that kamikazed into the hot plate: *tsss!* From the cockroaches that scuttled under the sacks of rice when I opened the walk-in cupboard door. The rotten vegetables sitting out back in the dumpster, sucking in the flies. The shrimp curled up in the freezer like embryos. Most of all I learned about death from Marcel. One night, about closing time, a bat got in through the window and flapped about under the fluorescent lights. I hit the floor, wrapped my hair in a used napkin. I could hear Donna scream-laughing from the other side of the door. Then Marcel came running in with a baking sheet and spiked the bat into the deep fat fryer: Ethel Merman singing “Whole Lotta Love” in a vat of boiling oil. I remember Marcel smiling, like he’d won a prize.

Death: whenever I broke a dish or fucked up an order, Marcel would kick the swinging door open and scream, “Jack, I’m going to *keel* you!”

“My name’s Rick.”

“My name’s Rick. What the fuck it matter to me. I still going to *keel* you, Jack!”

By now the spatula was shaking over his head and he was blistered in sweat. Red face. White hair shooting sparks out his hair net.

“Don’t look him in the eye,” Paul the Dishwasher said.

“Shut up that mouth, Jack.” The spatula now pointed at Paul’s back.

I snuck a look over at Paul. Pimply kid. Dungeons and Dragons type. He was leaning over the big stainless steel sink, facing the wall, and his shoulders were shaking. I bit my lip, started shredding the lettuce. But when I saw Marcel still glaring at us, chin up like Marlon Brando, I couldn’t help snorting. Bad habit. Paul’s shoulders were shaking lots now. He was laughing donkey-style.

Marcel jumped for him, snatched a dirty plate out of his hand, and smashed it against the floor: "Now you clean up *two* plates, dishpig! *You!*" He pointed at me. "Turn that radio down and why no hair net on that mess?"

I put the tape deck on pause, turning it down being sacrilege: "Funk #49" by the James Gang. Joe Walsh when he could still play guitar half-sober. Ugly southern distortion. I turned back and stared at the fishnet on Marcel's head. Him nodding slow, waiting for an answer.

"Hey, Marcel."

"What?"

"Two minutes for looking so good."

He ignored Paul donkey-laughing into the sink. Gave me a tap on the head with his spatula instead and then smiled mean: "You funny guy, eh? Yeah, pretty soon you be funny dead guy." He kicked the door open again, whispering through his teeth: "I *keel* you, Jack. Oh, yes. . ."

When the door swung back open, Donna walked in with a too-tight blouse and a half-eaten Reuben.

"You guys shouldn't talk to him like that. He's upset."

"No shit," I said.

"Vivien's threatening to chop off her ring finger. Says she's sick of waiting for Marcel to put something shiny round it."

"If she does," Paul said, "ask her if I can have it for science class."

Me and Donna raised our eyebrows at each other. Hers were thicker than mine. She shoved the plate of Reuben down on the counter and put her hands on her hips.

"Too much sauerkraut."

"It's a Reuben sandwich."

"The woman's a bitch. I'm not going to go back out there and tell her it's a Reuben sandwich."

"Tell her she's a bitch then."

Donna's eyebrows kinked up like black squirrels. Then her arms dropped and she laughed, kid-style, teeth biting her bottom lip while the rest of her face blushed over. I always felt embarrassed when she did this. It didn't go with her body, the short black hair curled tight around her head. She gave me a soft hip-check and said: "Ham and Eggs, a Western, and Marcel says if you don't wear a net at least put your hair in a ponytail."

"Yes'm."

She swept up a couple of new orders and waltzed out again. I watched the zipper on her hip jangle. And her legs: they were freshly shaven because each pore was a pin-prick of blood. When the door swung back and forth I could hear strains of "Blue Bayou" on the juke box, Marcel saying

“Not bad for a blind guy,” and someone laughing after it. My ass was still stinging from her pinch.

“I got one thing to say to you,” Paul said.

“Huh?”

“Hospital.”

Paul always said some pretty weird things. Half the time I'd just nod. This time I laughed dumb, tried to wipe the bacon grease from my hair. I felt something else, sticky, on my hand and forehead. When I looked down, the lettuce was soaked with red-black blood. There was the lettuce shredder still whirring round and here was my picking finger, hanging open by the tendons.

“Hospital,” I said.

Marcel opened the Sputnik Diner during the Hagersville Tire Fire of 1989. Said it was an act of God started the restaurant and a bunch of *steenking* kids started the fire. His grand opening sign said: WHY GO TO A BUNCH OF BURNING TIRES IN HAGERSVILLE WHEN YOU CAN GO TO THE MOON? EAT AT THE SPUTNIK. It covered both windows and the door; people had to crawl under it to get inside. I think most people only read as far as MOON anyway, because the diner never was Grand Central Station. When Marcel bought the place, a family was renting the upstairs apartment—a woman called Vivien, little boy and girl. Marcel didn't have the heart to kick them out, so for the first couple of weeks he slept on the black and white diamonds of the diner floor. Suitcase for a pillow, old menus for a blanket. One night Vivien felt so sorry for him she let him come up and share her fold-out couch. The next morning he woke up to a fingernail tracing the edges of his pubic hair. Four years later and he was still waking up with her beside him, though he'd bought a Craftmatic bed during the Gulf War.

Nowadays he only went upstairs if he was drunk. Most afternoons he hung the CLOSED sign up in the window, sat behind the counter with his gin and lemonade, and jawed with George and George, the couple of old pisspots grinning across from him. They laughed at everything he said as long as the booze kept coming, even if he told them he had prostate cancer. When Vivien came down, the laughing would stop: shaky hands running through greasy hair, glasses of gin and lemonade getting shoved under the counter. She'd walk straight for the cutlery drawers, pull out a Ginsu knife, and hold it at arms length.

“Here.”

“What?”

“Here. Why don't you get it over with?”

“Aw, Vivvy, not again. . . .”

“Just drive it in right here.” She pounded her chest. “Right through these tits you used to rub your fucking frog face in!”

“Vivvy, Vivvy, why you say these things? In front of my guests.”

“Your guests, my ass! Look at them: they’re starting to shake *now*. They’ve had to hide their drinks from me for thirty seconds.”

“Aw, no, Vivvy. You’re wrong.”

“Fucking right, I’m wrong. Been wrong ever since you walked in with that suitcase and that stupid white hair on your head. Wrong waiting for four years—*four fucking years!*—for you to come around and at least call the kids by their real names. Sean was waiting for you to come up and play Super Mario with him ever since he got home from school. And here you are pissed with these losers and he’s asleep on the floor with the joystick still in his hand.”

“Good kid, that Sean.”

“How would *you* know? You’re too busy pissing money down the drain with one hand and hiring those curvy little slut waitresses with the other. And besides, his name is Lance.”

“Ouch,” said George.

Marcel sighed, turned an *It’s-the-gin-talking* smile on Vivien. All he saw was the cash register and soft drink fountain. The thud of footsteps and then a door slamming upstairs.

“Marcel.”

“Yes, George.”

“That woman’s got a mouth on her.”

“You’re right there.”

“Yeah,” said George. “And she’s got a face for chopping wood on too.”

“You say that again, my very best friend, and I will *keel* you.”

That night Marcel clambered up the stairs, his hands fumbling for the walls in the darkness. The apartment door was locked. When his eyes adjusted, he saw the Ginsu knife stuck in the wood just above the peephole. He pressed his back against the door and slid down to his knees, tears lapping over his face.

“Fucking fingernail,” he said.

Least that’s what Donna told me.

“Marcel tells me everything,” she said. “I mean *everything*.”

On slow mornings in the Sputnik, we sat at a window booth, nursing coffees and praying no more customers came in. I usually listened as she filled me in, staring at the circuit between her neck and her face: happy and freckled. But her eyelashes were monsters. Small birds could use

them as springboards, dive right in her coffee cup. Sometimes I got tangled up in them. Had to shake my head hard, tell her to start over again.

"I said Marcel came down here from Quebec."

"Surprise, surprise. Don't you hear him dinging the bell every four seconds so he can shout out he's the former Quebecois Arm Wrestling Champion?"

"Smartass. Thing is, he's wanted." She was bent over the table now, whispering. When she blinked I felt the slightest draught: "His name isn't Marcel," she said. "It's something *La*-something."

"Guy Lafleur?"

She slapped my arm. Spilt coffee. "That's a baseball player or something, isn't it." Donna had those eyelashes and a white blouse that strained full when she bent over the tables, but she had an imagination on her: "Notice he doesn't have a driver's license, how he always pays for stuff in cash? They say he's got a wife back there, too."

I shook my head and looked out the window. Her reflection was spread out against the parking meters, staring wide-eyed at me, nodding. We both looked over at the counter where Marcel was talking confidential over a cigarette with George and George, waving the smoke in their faces. Them laughing, hands fidgety.

"You think he *keeled* someone?" I said. She ignored that.

"This one time, before you started here," she whispered, "I saw him out back by the dumpster with these two guys in suits—never seen them before—and he opened up this briefcase. Full of money. When one of those guys zipped it up and shook his hand, Marcel saw me in a window, just for a second. I was shitting. He never said anything about it though."

Marcel had stopped jawing with George and George; he was giving us the evil eye now. I nodded at him, watched his face get a bit pink.

"Get your ass out of gears, Jack. I don't pay you for the chatting up of girls."

I learned about carrots by the juke box.

Except for the Georges and a big Dutchman called Noel, every guy who walked into the Sputnik had the same name:

Ninety-year-old Jack from the Greyhound station. Also known as *That Old Bastard*. Ordered the Lunch Special #1 every day of the week, never failing to bitch that his ice water was too cold. Walked with two canes. If you went to the bus station at noon, you'd have to spend a good two hours on the ripped red leather couch in the "lobby" before That Old Bastard walked the single block back from his Sputnik lunch.

Black Jack. Swaggered in the door every morning with blonde, dyed-

black hair, a black fringe leather jacket, and snakeskin boots, black. Also two perfect blonde little boys holding tight to each hand. Only thing they said was daddy daddy daddy can we have juice. He'd poke a stub of white bread into a sunny-side up and read the *Toronto Sun* in silence. Export 'A' cigarette always lit in the bread-mopping hand. "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" always on the juke box. Alias *Hard-to-Figure Jack*.

Call the Cops Jack. A middle-aged motorcycle guy with hair so thin and blonde he'd pass for the grandfather of Black Jack's kids. Taught his own son to box from an early age. Kept him locked in the garage for the whole of August '76, opening the door every four hours to "pound the living shit out of the boy." This story he told with his chin up and his paw curled round a black coffee: "Turned the little crud into a man." I think his son was serving a third term in Millhaven Penitentiary.

Heart Attack Jack. This name covered several regulars.

Whenever Marcel dinged the bell and called out "*Jack!* Continental breakfast!" ten or more men would rush to the counter with their receipt. Sometimes fights would break out, blood and HP sauce all over the floor's black and white diamonds. Big Noel would have to step in then, laughing and choking back coffee. Noel was kind of a freelance bouncer. An electrician by trade, he spent his nights at the Melbourne Hotel, mornings at the Sputnik, afternoons at the Welfare office. He had the body of a bear, but was giddy as a cheerleader. If anybody made a wisecrack or even looked at him goofy, Noel started giggling. Only thing is, he always ate raw carrots alongside his bacon and eggs. At least once a week, someone would notice him get out of his chair quietly and walk to the washroom, his hand round his throat.

"S'matter Noel? You Chokin?"

Nod nod, yes yes.

"It's those carrots, Noel."

Nod nod.

Once I caught him all purple in the face, leaning on the juke box. I hurdled the counter and dove right into the Heimlich, but he was too huge: my hands couldn't reach round the other side. Two other men tried before the chunk of carrot shot out and splatted on the Wurlitzer logo. "You've Got a Friend" by James Taylor was playing. Noel started to giggle.

It got so whenever Noel sat down with his bacon & eggs and raw carrots, Marcel stood back and surveyed the room for the man with the longest arms: "Hey, *Jack!*"

I learned to play guitar in Donna's bedroom, between the butterflies and ice.

One Sunday I got off early because Marcel was sick of seeing my *heepy* face. I hung around the place just to bug him, pouring quarters in the juke box, whipping my hair round to the Talking Heads, shouting out the best part: "Three!Hun!Dred!Six!Ty!Five!De!Grees! . . . BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE!!!" Finally he said: "Okay. I make you a deal, Jack: you play that song one more time, I get to punch you in the face."

I made like I didn't hear him, just watched Donna making conversation with the customers: "I thought you had a heart attack last week, Charlie! . . . Is that right? . . . Well, no sex for you for a while, eh? . . ." Charlie must've been at least seventy-five.

I watched her lean over the empty table, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth as she wiped. Half an hour later my tongue was doing the same: me tugging at the zipper on her skirt, she breathing into my mouth, her hand a spider inside my jeans. When she saw my plaid boxers she laughed kid-style. Shut up shut up. Thick black hairs jabbed out from her panties like calligraphy. For a second I had this image of Marcel naked on his Craftmatic. It went away when I fell on top of her and the bed, our ankles tangled up in denim and black cotton.

She was sighing somebody else's name when I heard the noise under the bed. Hollow, like a boat. Then a spring popped out of the mattress, dragged across strings. An open chord. I slipped out of her and leaned over the side, dragged out the hunk of wood and metal.

"It was my father's," she said, and rolled over, scooping an ice cube from the glass on the floor. She placed the ice in between her legs and closed her eyes. Her breasts, in the light, looked pock-marked, like fallen dough. On the wall behind them, there was a glass case: butterflies pinned to a white background. One had fallen and lay crumpled on the bottom, the pin still sticking through its dry black shell. I kneeled down on the carpet, strummed the open strings until my penis was caked dry and only a few beads of water glistened on her wiry hair.

"It was your father's."

"Hmmm?" she said, opening her eyes.

"I said it *was* your father's."

"Yes."

In two weeks I'd learned the chords G, D, C, and A major and minor. I played "Tequila Sunrise" till my fingertips turned green from the rusted copper-bound strings. I was halfway through the second verse one night, getting to the "hollow feeling" line, when Donna jumped off the bed, saying she hated the Eagles and was going out for ice.

I learned about *Ben Hur* by the window. Donna's white blouse was in my face, she was filling up my coffee: "Marcel and me would be lovers if he

wasn't so old." I told her not to say stuff like that while I was eating. When she was done with another order, she slid into the booth and smiled across from me: "I got him into bed once."

"What?"

Vivien and the kids were away one weekend. Marcel was giddy as Noel the Dutchman, shuffling along to "Blue Bayou," twirling Donna around whenever she came by with a menu or a plate of steaming stuff. Him singing along with the Wulitzer in a French-Canadian accent: *Oh to see my baby again, and to be with some of my friends, maybe I'd be happier then, on Blue Bayou.* Then he'd turn to a George, smoke dangling: "Not bad for a blind guy, that Roy Orbeeson."

Marcel closed the place at ten o'clock that morning, broke out the gin and lemonade, and let the juke box play till nobody wanted to go back to Blue Bayou ever. Around midnight, Donna came back to the Sputnik to check up on him. He was blinking slow at the TV, George and George slumped unconscious over the counter across from him. His face looked thin, naked. "They got this machine," he said, never taking his eyes off the screen. "It's a vacuum *cleener* and it cuts your hair."

Donna helped him up the stairs, his body surprisingly light. At the door Marcel checked for the Ginsu knife, and then nodded, frowning: "It's okay, we go in." Donna laughed too loud and stood in the doorway, watching him trying to take his shoes off. When he started using his teeth, she got down on her knees and pushed his face out of the way.

"Donna, my waitress."

"Hmmm?"

"*Ben Hur.*"

"Ben who?"

"No no no no no. *Ben Hur*: greatest movie of all times. Romans and horses and Jesus and that guy who was Moses. Carlton Weston. You got to watch this man, people of your gen'ration. If I was a woman . . ."

"Gross," Donna said. "Now let's getcha to bed."

"Nope. You watch it with me tonight. On VHS."

She looked around, sighed okay: "Where's the machine?"

"Bedroom." He shrugged and closed his eyes, smiling.

Donna slid the tape in, waited for it to rewind. "Marcel," she said, gazing at the static screen. "Why'd you call it the Sputnik Diner?"

"Because this country. I am proud for being Canadian."

"But Sputnik was a Russian spaceship or something."

"Tell me lies. It's the proper name for that arm in space with CANADA on it. I'm from east of Gatineau. Proud for this country. I know . . . about the science."

Donna fixed her eyes on the TV till the letter-box screen flickered up and then the credits started to roll in yellow and red Technicolour: "Okay, you happy now, spaceman?"

When she turned around, Marcel was sprawled out on the Craftmatic, completely naked. Little white sparks of hair shot out from between his thighs. His cock looked malnourished. He was rocking side to side, and he was crying.

"The woman I live with, I don't love her."

"I know, Marcel."

"I pack my suitcase twelve times. Had it waiting under the counter, ready for going. But when I go to pick it up, my hand it reaches for the gin instead."

Donna put her hand on his knee; he took it and held it like money.

"Her face," he said, opening wet, serious eyes: "You can chop wood on it."

He fell asleep mumbling the number thirteen and something about hamburgers. Donna spread a blanket over him, tucked it under his feet, and turned the volume way up on the TV.

"Maybe he dreamt about Romans that night," she said.

"Marcel. Hire a new waitress. A skinny one."

Vivien's first words after she dumped her kids and weekend baggage onto the floor. Marcel obliged, no questions asked. He took on the first girl who walked in the Sputnik's door. You could hear Cheryl before you saw her. Bracelets jangled from her wrists and ankles, long dangly earrings made from metal and bone whistled by her shoulders when she moved. She was a porch full of wind chimes. But the rest of her was quiet. If Donna's voice didn't know what to do with itself, Cheryl's face was fenced in with barbed wire, her laugh a squeak with a hand in front of it. Donna's body an extrovert; Cheryl's thin-wristed and brown, attracted to the outskirts of rooms. And the new girl's hair was long, brown and dangerous. On a hot day, there was always the chance it would get tangled up in one of the metal fans dotted round the diner.

Donna and Cheryl-lyrehC dna annoD. Too opposite for real life. From my window booth, I watched the differences happen as Cheryl moved over the black and white diamonds, her hips jack-knifing past chairs and elbows. Me making a list of these things.

"Watcha writing?"

"Nothing."

Tsss! Marcel was watching the differences too, flipping bacon behind the counter. Peameal. I could smell it clear across the room. I could see his teeth, yellow from cigarettes, smiling at his girls through the grease

and smoke. *Done good*, he was thinking: *Hired a new waitress, just like Vivvy said*. Problem was he kept Donna on the payroll, slating her on the same shift as Cheryl most days. Now Vivien stood in the kitchen door with an electrical storm crackling over her head and stared through Marcel's back, past the two Georges, to the Jekyll and Hyde waitresses pirouetting on the diner floor.

I learned about strawberries from Amburger. I was left in charge on Sunday morning, frying up paprika hash browns and sausage on Marcel's personalized flat-top behind the counter. The Stones pouting out "Emotional Rescue" from the Wurlitzer, me doing my best Mick Jagger impression. No Georges around to make fun of me. Vivien sleeping upstairs. Donna wiping tables in the corner. I'd just twirled around to slap the bell when in walks six feet of fake fur, shocking pink, and hips.

Ding! She had black leather boots that funneled up her thighs. After that it was pink spandex clammed tight round her pelvis, gold ring in her navel, and a furry vest sort of thing that left the sides of her breasts bare. Her hair was dying to stay blonde. And she was carrying a green box full of strawberries.

"Hi, honey. Marcel around?"

"Hi."

"Hi. Is Marcel around?"

"No."

She laughed low and I was ten years old again.

"He still living with Mother Theresa?" she said, pointing at the ceiling.

I pictured a Ginsu knife in Marcel's chest: "Yes."

She laughed again. Tongue against teeth. Behind her, Donna was wiping the same table she'd been doing five minutes ago. Eyebrows on fire, scowling at me. I made a move to push my hair out of my face, forgot it was in a hair net.

The woman set the strawberries down and leaned over the counter. She smelled of menthol cigarettes, Grand Marnier.

"Tell him Amber's at The Pump tonight." She plucked a strawberry from the pile, worked it between her lips, then punished it between her teeth. I nodded stupid in my hair net: *Okay*. I smelled burning. When she walked out the door, I could see daylight through the gap at the top of her thighs.

Not ten minutes later, Marcel floated in with his arm draped round Noel the Dutchman's shoulder. I was still Brillo-padding the black chunks of hash brown from the flat-top, erection fading. All Noel said was: "Three whisky doubles on the rocks... he fall down... three whisky doubles on the rocks... he fall down again." He eased Marcel into a

window booth while Donna got coffee. Marcel slumped over, arm wrestling the air.

"Hey Marce," I said, carrying the strawberries waiter-style to the table: "Some chick called Amber came by and brought you these."

I felt a sharp stab in my ribs. Donna's elbow. Marcel slapped his arm down on the table and sat up straight. He ignored the coffee Donna shoved in front of him, grabbed the box of strawberries in his massive hands, and stared milky at me: "Amburger?"

I nodded. Close enough.

A smile spread across his face like jam: "Amburger."

"You shouldn't have told him," Donna said, scooping another ice cube out of her glass and running it up the inside of her thigh. I watched a silver trail tickle down around the back of her leg. I leaned over the bed, my knees sore on the carpet, and lapped it up slow with the tip of my tongue. Liquid. She started wrapping my hair around her fist, her own hair black and rough against my cheek.

"Why, what's the deal with *Amburger*?"

"Don't know what you're saying."

"Okay," I said. "I'll rephrase: what did Marcel tell you about this stripper called Amber?"

"Your mouths too full. Ask me later."

Later her fingertips were drumming her pillow absently; mine were green and busy with the guitar. I had a few more chords under my belt now: E major and minor, F, B minor. Problem was I'd lost all feeling in my picking finger. The stitches from the lettuce shredder were still buried in there. My skin had grown thick over the nylon thread. Now I had to watch my strumming hand the whole time I played, otherwise I'd be fumbling at air. (Donna noticed this in bed too.) I still managed "Play with Fire" though, and would've finished "Strawberry Fields Forever" if she hadn't thrown the ice water in my face while I was doing an extra-nasal John Lennon: *No one, I think, is in my tree . . .*

She sat up, her breasts slouching over her belly: "Ever since you picked up that thing our fucking's gotten, I don't know, *efficient*."

I stood up, shook the ice out the guitar, then laid it careful across the foot of the bed and walked to the door: "Look."

"Hmmm?" She stared expressionless at me, wet and hairy by the light switch.

"Bet you five bucks my fingertips glow in the dark."

By the time I flicked the switch back on, the guitar had gone *brummm!* against the floor. Donna was bundled under the covers, facing the wall. I looked in the butterfly case for her reflection, but I couldn't see past the dead insects.

I learned about flukes from Cheryl. My hands were rich with liver and onions and she was dusting another broken plate into the garbage. Her body sighed. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a long, dark leg slip out her skirt, a scar visible on the knee. I waited for her jewelry to stop singing, then nodded toward the garbage can.

"Which order was that? The Reuben?"

"Not Reuben," she said: "reuben. It's a small 'r'."

Her face was serious.

At lunchtime, after she brushed off a bowl of minestrone soup, I gave her the Sputnik questionnaire: a) so where you from and b) what the hell are you doing *here*?

a) *Newfoundland.*

b) *My grandmother. She's dying.*

She stirred her coffee counter-clockwise and stared out the window. Eyes like blue granite. A car floated by in her pupils. I felt my hand, damp, tighten around my cup. Wanted to say something like *my coffee's cold*, but my eyes got caught up in a chain dangling shiny in the V of her blouse, a silver whale's tail threaded onto it.

"It's my fluke," she said, pulling it away from her skin. I nodded, cleared my throat a bit loud. Her watching me watching her. She plucked a strand of hair from her tongue, let it fall slow-motion into the tin ashtray, then stared down at her coffee. Me surprised when she kept talking, twirling the fluke between her long, shellacked fingernails.

"I used to go to this little fishing village about a half hour south of St. John's. Ferryland. Ever heard of it? *Anyway*, the wind off the coast there always smelled of pine trees. Always. And there was this cove where maybe twenty humpbacks used to come and . . . umm . . . play. We'd sit at the front of the boat and dangle our feet over the edge. You could see them swim under the boat and then surface right beside you. Perfect. Then: *psssh!* They'd bring their flukes up out the water and it was like they were waving at you. Showoffs, I thought. Then I read in *National Geographic* or something that that's how they tell each other apart. Individuals. No two flukes are the same. Sort of a whale fingerprint."

She looked back out the window and, nodding quiet to herself, placed the fluke flat on her chest. I swallowed a mouthful of cold coffee.

"A Chevy Impala just cruised straight through your left eye," I said.

I learned about rodents in Marcel's apartment. Marce was taking Vivien and the kids to a trailer park north of Toronto; he asked Donna to mind the place for the weekend. Vivien wasn't too comfortable with the idea. Her exact words: "I'd rather drink Tabasco in hell than have that slut sleeping in my bed." Marcel, making sure he stood between her and the cutlery drawers, said: "It's okay, Vivvy. We'll drop you off at the CN

Tower with some *b*ynoculars so you can stand up there and watch all the goings-on down here.”

On Saturday night, I closed the Sputnik early and went upstairs, guitar slung over my shoulder. (Almost had the 6/4 timing to “Sweet Thing” figured out, dead finger and all.) When I opened the door, Donna and Cheryl were running round the apartment, screaming. I thought they were pissed until a bat swooped down, ears and teeth an inch from my face. I swung the guitar round, missed, then dropped to the floor. “Wimp,” Cheryl said. While Donna was busy jumping on and off the bed, Cheryl caught the bat in a patchwork quilt and then swung the bundle into the corner. Then our breathing died down and we could hear this noise, *crick-crick-crick* like a geiger counter, moving along the baseboards. I said “Shit.” Donna laughed kid-style. Cheryl kicked a chair out of the way and came out of the corner a minute later with the bat in her hands: “Open the window.”

I was still flat on the carpet, too impressed to move. She nudged the window open herself, but when she threw the thing out over Robinson Street, she knocked a plant from the sill. A second later we heard it crash against the sidewalk. Cheryl shrugged, closed the window, and dusted off her hands: “No casualties.” I pictured a Ginsu knife in her chest.

Three more bats flew in Marcel’s apartment that night. After the second one we just left the windows open, hoping they could find their own way out. Later we rummaged through Marcel’s movie collection, bypassing *Ben Hur* and settling on *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Even before the *Good* saved the *Ugly* from his first hanging, Cheryl fell asleep on the floor in front of me. Her hair spilled across the rug like soft coral. In the darkness I worked it, silky, between my bare toes. Donna, bored with the movie, went to the freezer for a glass of ice. She came back from the kitchen with her T-shirt off, balled up in her hand. Curly hairs were visible outside the V of her panties. Her tits looked disappointed. She said: “I think I’d like to go to Mexico.”

“Actually,” I said, “they made these films in Italy. Hence the term Spaghetti Western.”

“I don’t give a shit where they were made.”

We spent the rest of the night on the Craftmatic: Clint Eastwood squinting on the TV, bats making casual flights around the apartment, my cock dreaming in Donna’s cold mouth, and my feet in Cheryl’s hair.

Home from the trailer park the next morning, Vivien could only find two faults with the place 1) The missing African Violet and 2) The stale glass of water beside the bed.

I learned about chemical reactions from Paul the Dishwasher. One morn-

ing Marcel came in the kitchen nursing a hangover. Wasn't in there two seconds before he snapped at Paul: "Turn down that racket, and after you done them plates, *cleen* out the sink, and *good!*" The big steel basin was corroded, a ring of brown rust sleeping there for years now. Paul plugged it up and dumped in a whole bottle of Windex. I was fixing up a Sputnik Omelette, sprinkling cheese, onions, and green peppers into the pan. Humming along to "Chuck E.'s in Love" on the Classic Hits station. Before the first chorus hit, Paul poured something else into the sink, and then donkey-laughed.

"S'up, Paul?"

"Check this out," he said, waving me over. I was halfway across the the kitchen floor when a blue mushroom cloud plumed out the sink. Went up my nostrils like razor blades. I saw Paul's legs buckle, then the back of his skull go smack against the tiles. Next thing I knew, I was dragging him from the basin, trying to slap him back to life, and Marcel was already peeling me away from the kid like I was papier-mâché.

"Don't hit him when he is out like that, Jack."

I nodded. Okay.

"Let the little guy's body handle it. It'll know when to wake up."

I looked at Marcel dumb. Never heard him talk so quiet and sensical.

"It'll know," he said, tapping me soft on the shoulder, nodding.

For the next few minutes we said nothing, just stared down at the zonked-out teenager. Me kneeling on the tiles, Marcel standing behind me, spatula folded in his arms. Under the fluorescent lights, the walls began to hum lime green. Objects in the room started losing their names, got naked. Pretty soon I was wiping my hands on my jeans. Behind me the former arm wrestling champion of Quebec was slapping a cooking utensil against his chest in hypnotic rhythm. The Sputnik Omelette was burnt black as cancer. Rickie Lee Jones was whining *Cos . . . Chuck E.'s-inlovewiththelittlegi-irrrlll . . . who's singing this song*. And there was something about Paul's face under the lights, too. Flaky, almost green. I half expected his pimples to start sprouting flowers.

Then his eyelids flickered. Marcel dropped the spatula and knelt down beside me, propping up Paul's head, his big red fingers in the boy's greasy hair. Me guilty from seeing this intimate gesture. He tapped Paul lightly on the cheek. When Paul's eyes rolled open, squinting against the lights, Marcel slapped him a couple more times, then punched him square on the nose: "You *leettel eediot!* What the fuck you think you doing?!"

Before he could throw another punch, I got him in a headlock, connected with a right and then—*kungg!!!*—an accidental knee to the balls. Marcel's face blanched. He squirmed loose, grabbed a fistful of my hair, then went for the throat, shaking me like a bottle of World Series

Champagne. I snapped up the spatula, held it over my head guillotine-style. By now sinews were electrical cables popping out of Marcel's arms. His hair net had slipped sideways off his head and his face was glaring red back at me: "I will *keel* you, Jack . . . this time . . . *Keel* you!"

Then, for a moment, I heard wind chimes. They danced in and out of the room, just above our breathing and swearing. Froze me long enough for the door to swing open and something cold to touch my neck. Vivien: Ginsu pressed flat against my skin. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Donna and Cheryl over by the steam table, trying not to look. Then I heard giggling; the next thing Big Noel grabbed me under the arms, plucked me off Marcel, and sat me up on the counter like I was a three-year-old. I looked around the room and everyone else was crying. (Except for Paul: he was pinned under Marcel, out cold again. When he came to, he only had one thing to say and I've never seen him since.) Before I knew it I was spilling tears, too, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*." Then I realized our eyes were watering from Paul's sink cocktail.

I learned about inefficient sex on the stairs. On a Tuesday afternoon I went to the Sputnik to pick up my last cheque. Marcel wasn't around. Vivien, hot and flustered behind the counter, threw me an envelope and said: "Hang on, you. Got something else upstairs."

I waited at the counter, the Georges sitting a few stools down from me. They both grinned, bloodshot over their morning bottles of Budweiser: "Ya leaving us, young guy?" George asked.

"Yes, George."

"He's going to be a rock 'n roller," George said. "Be the next Paul Anka."

"That right?" George laughed, his head bobbing between his shoulders.

"Fuck off, George," I said, but I was laughing too.

Then Vivien came back out the swinging door with a T-shirt scrunched up in her hand: "Found it under the couch cushions. Yours, I expect."

I smiled: "Thanks, Vivvy." As I walked out across the black and white tiles, "Sea of Love" wobbled from the Wurlitzer. I could feel Vivien's eyes dissecting my back. I stopped outside the window and, cranking up a fake smile, waved through the sign. But she was looking away, talking snarky to one of the Georges. Her greying hair was stuck flat to her forehead, almost black with sweat.

Click. The light was blown out in the entrance to Donna's apartment. This meant blackness, even in the daytime. At the foot of the stairs, I heard Donna sighing out my name. I ran up a couple of steps, stumbling over a bundle of newspapers, then heard her voice again. I stood outside the door, listening: knock. Knock. Squeak. Knock. Squeak. My name be-

ing called again. Knock. Quiet tinkle of glass. After that, all I heard was a fan whirring in the darkness above me, a car horn outside. I draped the T-shirt neatly over the doorknob and walked slow down the blackened stairs.

I learned about death on a cordless phone. *The Ten Commandments* was the CBC Late Movie and I was splayed out on the couch, Donna's voice crackling in my ear. She was in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Said she'd found this AT&T calling card on the bus station floor: "So here I am calling *you!*" She asked me if I'd gotten any of the postcards she sent. I said no. Then she told me about Marcel.

"It was awful, Rick. The last time I saw him, he was sprawled out in the back seat of a cab outside the Sputnik. He had his suitcase with him and a bottle of gin and he was spilling it all over the place. Crying. And he kept saying how he didn't want to be hurting anyone, but Amburger was waiting for him at the Zanzibar in Toronto. I couldn't stop from crying. I don't know, his hair was so white. I could see clear through it, see his scalp. You know the last thing he said?" A shaky laugh. "Drive, Jack."

I heard her voice catching over the fibre optic line, then she said: "I went back the next day and there was this guy in a three-piece suit asking where Marcel was. He told me how much money Marce owed some people. *Some people*, what the fuck does that mean? I said I didn't know anything about it. Then first thing Vivien does when I walk in the door is fire me. Canned Cheryl, too. Bitch. Did you ever see her after you quit?"

"Who?"

"Vivien."

"No."

"Well, she took off too, after nobody but the Georges kept coming to the place. Just packed up the kids and left. God knows where. Gave all Marcel's movies and shit to the Salvation Army."

She gave me time to say something. In the silence I could hear the ghost of another conversation, a pair of southern voices. Something about a fire.

"Oh, and Noel the Dutchman died."

"What?"

"Yeah. Few days after Marcel skipped town. Choked to death halfway to the bathroom."

"The carrots."

"No," she said. "Diamond ring. It must've fallen into the scrambled eggs or something. When the coroner brought it back the next day, no one claimed it. Then, get this, Vivien tried it on and it was a perfect fit."

"No."

“Uh-huh.”

Awkward silence. She told me about the food in the Youth Hostel, some (“get this”) Russian guy she’d met, and a fat lady who kept picking her up and dancing with her “like I was a frigging rag doll!”

After that, her voice was far away and I started saying “yeah” in all the wrong places. Switching the phone to the other ear, I said: “Look, I’d better go. This thing must be costing you a mint.”

“No, it’s all right. It’s on the calling card, remember?”

“Yeah, but I really should go. Kinda busy.”

“Guitar, right?”

“Huh?”

“Still playing that damn guitar?”

“Oh, yeah.”

When I hung up she was still saying goodbye. I clicked the telephone off and set it down on the coffee table. A pile of postcards smattered to the floor. Charlton Heston was standing in front of me, six inches tall and gawking at a Technicolour burning bush. Click. I stretched back out on the couch. In the darkness I pictured Marcel, white hair luminous as lightning, standing alone at his personalized flat-top on the moon, still waiting for the bacon to come down. A box of strawberries levitating half-empty over the counter. *Ding!* I closed my eyes and rolled over.

“Don’t put my fluke in your mouth,” Cheryl said. “It’ll rust.”

Elva Macías

El Juego

Rodeas los almendros.
A tu paso
levantan el vuelo las perdices
y un jinete de alas y sombrero
te amenaza desde el cuento nocturno.
Es tu jornada silencioso juego.

translated by Caroline J. Davis

The Game

You go 'round and 'round the almond tree.
At your steps
the partridge fly up
and out of the nighttime story
a winged horseman and a hat
intimidate you.
It's your silent daylong game.

The Story of an Eye

Norman Ravvin

I've been told that in the old country they brought a sick man a pineapple, the sort of fruit that was nearly impossible to find, so its arrival would strike him as a magical act, a bright omen. Nobody gave me a pineapple. In fact, once I'd started home, just barely staying on my feet, a kid coming out of a greasy spoon yelled something and elbowed me out of his way. That was on Drake. I landed on the grass by the roadside and someone lifted my foot off the pavement so it wouldn't be run over. I heard a voice ask, "Are you okay?" But, whoever it was, was gone before I could answer.

What followed is mostly a blur to me and I can remember only bits and pieces. The clouds making way for the moon and glowing silver over the mountains. The swirl of fruit flies over the doorstep of the building on Georgia Street. In the alleys, ragged men digging in dumpsters for half-eaten food. When I saw the sign above a door on Homer that read "Wood Laboratory, Chemists, Bacteriologists" I realized I was heading in the wrong direction and I turned myself around and walked west over the bridge toward where I live. I felt like a cartoon character, crawling in the desert with his clothes in rags, keeping an eye out for a mirage of kindness.

I used to tell my students—it drove them crazy with boredom—that in the old country you couldn't get a nectarine or a pineapple. Here you can get anything you like. Poor men grow up to run empires. Every day I see people in my neighbourhood who look like gods—men with their chests bursting, women with their heels dug deep in the earth. I can sense their pleasure, their satisfaction; it trails behind them like musk. They don't have any trouble looking beautiful as long as they're safe among their treasure. It's when you're solitary, scattered, struggling under the gaze of strangers, that you start to feel ugly and tired. And I do. I'll be the first to admit it.

It's been a year since I worked, and a couple of months since I talked to anyone other than the mailman or the check-out clerk at the corner store. I've let myself go. I've let things happen that I never thought would happen to me, only to others. I've begun to look like a bum. That's a word

you used to hear a lot. What do social workers say nowadays? Person of the Street? That sounds almost alluring—an exotic career—like Lady of the Night. But there are variations on the theme I haven't tried yet. I don't drink aftershave on park benches. I'm no junkie, no beggar, no digger in dumpsters. I still know the year and the day and my name and I can recognize the way others look at me; but still, I've begun to look like a bum. I have an unacceptable scent. It's not that I smell of sweat or urine or of airless rooms. I smell organic, alive. But not human. Humans smell of soap, spice, pressed cotton. Those are human smells, though it's a funny thing to consider.

Where I grew up, apples dropped in the grass in the dark. Autumn light fell in yellow bands through the picket fence. There was a deep closet full of clean linen, fresh towels, furred umbrellas. I'll take you there some time. If we cross town, turn left, open the gate and ring the bell, I'm sure someone will be home to show us what's in that closet.

I've almost forgotten what it was like to work. To get up each morning and have somewhere familiar to go. I enjoyed my job, the kids, the school. I always thought of myself as a good teacher. And now I don't recall how it all came unravelled. Something to do with hands and hair. I couldn't make sense of it at the time and I'm not much clearer about it now. But summer came and I was cleaning out my office instead of looking forward to the fall. I still thought for a time I would get back to it, back to work. But a year has passed; I've got what's left of my severance to pay the rent, and I'm bursting with boredom and bad premonitions. I'm not fit to be a teacher anymore.

I was ashamed of myself this morning when the young man saw me coming up the street. He was surprised at first, but then he looked worried. I walked toward him, naked below my shirt, an awful dark mess where my left eye should have been. All the way home from downtown, across the bridge and through the quiet neighbourhoods, I'd been telling myself it was just swollen shut, badly bruised, that it would surely heal and open again. But the way he looked at me erased any hope I'd had.

He told me to stay put and he ran back to the place where he worked. I suppose he was looking for a towel or a blanket, but all he came up with was a mail bag. A canvas Canada Post mail bag. I held it around myself like a skirt, but it kept falling, and he helped me re-adjust it, though I could tell he didn't really like the idea of touching me. I was a strange, incomprehensible obscenity: a half-naked, newly-made invalid trying to get home.

That was his next suggestion. He'd take me home. But somehow the directions I gave him and the way he heard them didn't jibe. I knew, in the dark, behind my closed eye, that we were less than a block away

from my apartment. But somehow we managed to walk up the street and back, the mail bag slipping and passersbys looking at us as if we were ghosts, before he got me back to the building where I live.

And, of course, I'd lost the key to the front door. I told my guide he could leave, that I would just wait for the first tenant to come by who would let me inside. But he had no intention of doing that. He insisted on calling an ambulance, because he thought, if I didn't attend to what remained of the left eye, the right one would be lost, too. I honestly didn't care. I'd have given them both to have the whole thing over. I knew that with an ambulance comes a police car, that the police ask for next of kin and I have none, and that my landlord had been searching high and low for a reason to evict me. The obvious solution would be to drop me off at the mental health centre. That's what the cops are trained to do with difficult cases. They drop them off and let things work themselves out.

At the school where I taught, it was hands and hair. But I wasn't trying to accost anyone, or take advantage of their innocence, as the complaint against me implied. There's no pleasure in taking advantage, just as there is none in being taken advantage of. But there didn't seem to be a way of countering my colleagues' arguments. They even seemed unconvinced themselves of the complaints against me, and my teaching reports were excellent, but they had become convinced that they wanted me gone, because of who I am.

For some time I've been visiting the paths that cross the centre of Stanley Park where men go to meet. There's busy traffic there after work hours, boys and grandfathers, office workers in short-sleeve shirts. But hidden among this crowd is the odd fearful outsider, a kind of hunter. And my judgement is so bad. I always pick the ones who've come out of fear. The ones who've made an agreement with themselves about who it is they hate, who it is they would rather see dead than alive. My choosing these types must say something about me, but I don't care to look into it very deeply. It's much too late for that.

The reason I know better than to trust the police, or the ambulance men for that matter, is because I know they have the same cold thoughts as the men in the park who've made up their minds. And when I look at it that way, I realize I'm no safer in the hands of the authorities than I was in the shadows, among the fire and the stinkweed below Lumberman's Arch. That's where it began. I could see the pyramids of sulfur and flat-topped hills of sawdust across the inlet; I could see a flash of red azaleas against the violet water; I could see the bulk of the bridge's span disappearing behind a bend, and fallen trees draped in dirty cobwebs. The obligatory "Jesus Saves" was sprayed on a pedestrian overpass in orange neon paint. As if in answer to this, someone had etched "BRIDGE OF

DEATH" in black on a pylon seeping mossy water. The past fall's leaves gathered around me in gullies like the beds of fallen angels. And the air was cool as I walked through the dankness until I came upon Beaver Lake, which is surrounded by a climate from another hemisphere. Coming upon it is like stepping out of one world and into another. The stalled water and the protective walls of the surrounding forest gather the summer heat and hold it.

I saw, sitting in the shade, in the cool of a forgotten season, two men. They seemed to beckon to me from across the lake so I walked toward them. As I went I felt the afternoon slowing down, heating up, and everything around took on the strangest clarity. Lily pads—half green, half burgundy—shifted on the lake. Ducks flashed their green foreheads at me, their orange sideburns. Steam rose off the wet logs gathered at the water's edge; and along the shallow corners of the lake, pike sculled on the muddy bottom.

As I came close, the two men rose from the bench where they sat, and disappeared into the forest. I followed, watching as they stopped in a clearing. Light streamed around them—over their shoulders and between their legs.

But, of course, it was all a mistake. A misunderstanding. By the time they had finished with me, it was getting dark and I saw my blood in dark patches on the dirt. I lay there, trying to coax myself up, but the feeling in my belly was terrible, and the left eye—the dark one—gave the impression that the top half of the world had disappeared. As I lay, listening, I became aware that twilight objects often start to make odd sounds and fall apart.

It took me all night to find my way home. And by the time I arrived back at the street where I live, to the horror of the man who offered me the mail bag, I must have looked like spent fruit, the flesh of the inside of my cheek showing and the left eye gone. Naked below my shirt, hands hanging in a pathetic effort at modesty, I heard myself say, "I don't want to be a bother. I'll find my way . . ."

By the time the ambulance arrived, one of the tenants from my building was telling my helper, loudly, as if I were deaf or not there, that they'd been trying to evict me, that they'd had to renovate the house around me, that the smells from my apartment seeped like poisonous gas into the neighbouring rooms. "*It's worse than Chernobyl,*" I heard the young woman yell, as the tanned ambulance attendant fixed me tightly to the stretcher. His face was blank. Uninterested in my condition, he was thinking of his girlfriend, of donuts, of the weather.

When I looked up at the man who'd brought me the mail bag, I could see that he hated himself for having called the authorities, though all he'd

meant to do was save my one good eye. I think he knew then that I'd have given my right eye to simply get inside, go upstairs and lie down in the dark. In his way, though, he'd meant well, and I regretted, as I was lifted into the back of the van, that we'd not met under better circumstances. As the back gate of the van slammed shut, I heard pineapples plummeting to earth, nectarines falling softly in the dark.

Elva Macías

Lejos de la Memoria

Nacimos, dicen,
en lechos de rescoldo.
El tronco desgaja sus ramas de ceniza,
frágiles en el peso,
altas
en el vuelo de su desprendimiento.

translated by Caroline J. Davis

Far From Memory

We are born, they say,
in beds of cinders.
The tree sheds its high branches
of ash
fragile as the weight
of their burning out in flight.

Over Here

Jack Hodgins

Will you take a look at this, my dad said. This here's how you and me will make our fortune.

He opened a jack-knife and ran a slit along the bark of a fallen tree.

He'd chopped down three of them. Chips flew. You had to hold up your arm to protect your eyes. The trees creaked and groaned as they tilted, then they fell with a swish. You could feel the thump through your feet. This was out in a back corner of the farm. Even the huckleberries were tall.

Now he cut a ring around the trunk. Using his fingers and the blade of the knife, he started to pry off strips of bark. Thin as leather, orange behind the grey. The inside was wet and yellow.

We'll lay these out on the barn roof to dry in the sun, he said. Then we'll sack 'em up and take them in to the depot.

The depot was where we took the beer bottles from Sunday morning ditches, and burlap sacks of sticky fir cones in summer.

What will they do with it? I said.

Here, smell. You like that?

He held the inside of a piece of bark to my face. A sharp sweet smell.

Tastes good too, he said, but I wouldn't go licking it, you'd spend the rest of the day on the run.

What is it?

They make stuff in bottles out of it, for people who'd be glad to run to the toilet for a change. It's cascara. Here—

He rooted around in his pocket and came up with another jack-knife like his own, and gave it to me. Cracked mother-of-pearl on one side, with four different blades folded along the length.

You can do this just as good as I can. Start on that one over there.

I had to press hard with the point to get it started. I used both hands and leaned my weight into it. He gave me a flat wide chisel for where the bark didn't want to come away. The knife blade was wet. I didn't lick.

It was like skinning something alive.

It was like being one of the Indians we'd learned about in school. The

Blackfoot, the Iroquois. Burning missionaries at the stake, cutting out hearts, peeling off a living man's skin. Putting on parties where they gave away everything they owned. Miss Percy cooked a pot of fish-head soup. We sat under a tree and listened to her read from a book about a talking raven. You had to have courage to be an Indian. You had to be strong. Miss Percy had known an Indian who died in the recent War.

Any minute now a band of warbling braves would burst into this clearing and capture me. They would scalp my dad and drag me off to be a slave in their village. I'd have to fight with the dogs for food scraps thrown to the ground. Until one day I saved the tribe from extinction. Then they'd reward me by making me their chief.

You think there was ever an Indian village here?

Well now, my dad said. Have you seen pictures of Indian villages in this part of the world?

Wooden longhouses, I said, with totem poles out front.

Always along a beach. Do we live on a beach, can you tell me?

The beach is two miles away.

Well, do we live on a river filled with salmon then?

We don't even have a creek.

What kind of Indians would build a village on this here gravel pit here? They'd rather sit back and laugh at some idiot white man, breaking his neck to grow puny spuds and stunted hay from this goddam rocky soil.

My dad drank from the wide-mouth mason jar of cherry Freshie he'd kept in the shade. Then he leaned back against a standing tree and rolled a cigarette.

Do you think there were any wars? I said.

On our ranch, you mean?

It was never a farm, it was always a ranch, though we had only twelve acres left, most of it bush. One cow. Thirteen chickens. A pig.

Tribes slaughtering one another, I said. Battles.

Only if they wanted to make sure they never found each other, my dad said. Back in them days trees here were as thick as the hair on your head. Didn't that teacher tell you anything? Wars happen on plains—the Plains of Abraham weren't populated with Douglas firs.

We don't have any plains around here.

He set fire to the scraggly tobacco at the end of his cigarette.

That's my point. They'd have their battles out on the water maybe, in their longboats. Or down along the beach.

I guess I'll never find any arrowheads then, I said.

No Indian ever wanted this here place, said my dad. They were smarter'n that. It took a bureaucrat in Ottawa to decide this land should be opened up. Gave it to Great War vets like your fool grandfather, that

didn't know nothing better than the rocks of Connemara.

Without their bark, the cascara trunks were as slick and pale as human flesh in the bath. The naked legs of giants.

There were no Indians at school. Some Indians lived on a Reserve twenty miles to the north, some lived ten miles to the south. They went to other schools. Miss Percy invited a woman from a Reserve to speak about their way of life. She told us how they smoked salmon. She told us about making oolichan grease. Once, when a raiding party was coming south they sent their women and children to safety up into the mountains, but when they went to get them afterwards they'd disappeared. Nobody ever found them. Nobody even found bones, or footprints. Today, the band was mostly well-to-do fishermen with a chief who didn't look like an Indian at all. She held up a picture for us to see.

Then one Indian came to school, but she didn't know that that was what she was.

And don't you ever tell her, said my dad.

Why not?

The Tremblays would have your hide. So would I. You could ruin that girl's life. They want her to have a chance to make something of herself.

A priest had driven up Wolf Lake Road on Tuesday and handed her over to the Tremblays, who lived across from us. On Wednesday she was sitting across the aisle from me in school.

As if raising five boys of their own isn't enough work for that poor woman, my dad said. The priest don't care how hard she works, they do what he tells them to do.

The Tremblays were the only Catholics in this part of the district and had to drive all the way in to town for church. My dad was scared that Mr. Tremblay might take it into his head to donate a corner of his property for a church out here in the bush. Right across the road from us, he imagined. Right smack in front of our kitchen window. Cars boiling up dust down the gravel road, parking all over the place, ruining our breakfast.

What did they tell her she was? I said.

Who know? A child of God, maybe. She's got five brothers now to tell her she's a Norwegian queen.

Nettie Tremblay. I watched her out of the corner of my eye across the aisle. You weren't supposed to stare. How could you not know something that was known by everyone else? I could change everything, if I wanted. A scrap of paper with the news scribbled on it. No name. Just knowing I could do this made me feel warm and generous towards her. I was protecting her. We all were. One word and her life would be blown apart.

She'd go nuts and pull out her hair. She wouldn't be able to stand it. She'd kill herself.

Except, why wouldn't she want to know?

If we knew something about Nettie Tremblay that she didn't know herself, this could be true of me as well. When I turned twenty-one maybe I would find out that I'd been an Indian brave all along. Grandson of a Huron chief, sent out to learn the ways of the white man before being called home to rule my people. I wouldn't fall apart when I heard. I'd have my own hut, my own animal skin robes. I would have my own slaves who did everything I told them to do. I'd be the richest man in the tribe.

On Saturdays my father cut down half a dozen trees and left me to peel cascara bark on my own. He'd thought of another way to get rich. Nettie Tremblay came across to watch. I offered her a share of my allowance if she'd fill the gunny sacks and help me lay out the bark on the roof of the barn.

You like the smell of that? I said.

She nodded. It was a pleasant smell. Sometimes it was almost impossible not to lick the inside of the bark, except that you remembered what would happen.

I guess you've eaten bark before, I said.

No, she said. Why would I?

Do you like smoked fish better than beef? I said.

I don't know.

Her eyes went blank, as though she'd gone away inside. She must have been lying.

Do you like to eat berries? I said.

Sure, she said. She snatched huckleberries off a nearby bush and ate them.

Not like that, I said. You break off a whole branch, like this. Then you carry it around.

There was a war here once, I said. Right where we're standing. An Indian war. Seventy-six braves were slaughtered right here, their blood soaked into the earth. Some of them were skinned alive. Pieces of flesh were cut off and fed to the dogs. Had you heard about that? You could be standing right on top of a Kwakuitl skull.

She wasn't interested in my war. She carried slabs of bark to the gunny sack and stuffed them inside.

I wouldn't mind being an Indian, I said. *Hyas klahowyum nikt.*

I'd memorized some Chinook, since I didn't know which language I would need when the time came.

She made a face. I'm going to be a movie actress.

You can't be a movie actress.

Why not?

Because.

I can if I want. Why can't I?

Because. You don't look like a movie actress.

I will when I'm older.

No you won't. They'll make you go and be a servant to the nuns.

She blew a raspberry. Maybe I'll be a nun myself.

I bet you won't

I bet I will.

I bet you'll have eighteen kids and some of them will die.

She dropped her armload of bark to the ground and started to leave.

They won't die, I said. I'll be a doctor by then and I'll save them.

Nettie Tremblay's skin was the dark red-brown of the soil around rotted stumps. Her hair was black as crows but it was not parted down the middle with two long braids at the back. Mrs. Tremblay hacked it off short and curled it. She didn't have the beauty of a Mohawk girl in a book. She was chubby. Her face was wide and quite flat, like the drunks outside the beer parlour of the Lorne Hotel.

Are there any Indians in our family? I asked my dad at the supper table. He was prying stubborn eggs off the frying pan.

Not so nobody'd notice, he said. Some figured Aunt Elsie's Frank for one but he turned out to be just another Italian.

He put my plate down in front of me. Fried potatoes with an egg broken over them. Boiled peas.

I mean in our veins, I said. Uncle Leo's pretty dark.

Uncle Leo was my mother's brother. Maybe my mother had had Indian blood in her veins. Maybe when she went off for a better life she'd gone to rejoin her tribe.

He pulled in his chair and started forking up his food. My dad ate fast, hardly noticing what he was doing. His left hand picked at the flaking paint on the table.

I'd like to be an Iroquois, I said. No, I'd like to be a Blackfoot and live in a teepee. Moving around. It'd be fun to shoot buffalo.

I'd rather be a Haida myself, my dad said. Then I could lie around carving sticks of wood while my slaves did all the work.

He could say things that made you wonder if he read your mind. He winked. The patch of bared table grew larger every day, like a continent expanding and changing shape, eating up the paint.

Maybe you'd rather be one of their whalers, I said. In a boat hollowed out of a log. Throwing spears.

I wouldn't like that at all, my dad said. I'd have to drag the whales back to shore and cut them up. Too much work.

He mopped the broken egg-yolk off his plate with a piece of bread.

Then I'd have to eat the blubber, he said. I guess I'll stay the way I am, ignorant and poor and white. At least I've got spuds on the table, and once in a while a chicken.

Maybe even beautiful Iroquois maidens had flat plain faces when they were young. Maybe Nettie Tremblay would be pretty when she grew up. She'd never be a movie actress but she might be beautiful enough to marry.

Our children would be half-breeds. Half Indian, half mongrel Irish. We'd go in search of her roots, and find out that she was a hereditary princess. The first thing I would do is order a raiding party to go off and capture a dozen slaves—white, brown, it didn't matter. My father would be amongst them. Maybe I'd pretend I'd never see him before. My throat tightened when I thought of this. My father would give his life for me in a minute but I was an ungrateful son who would take my time about deciding what to do with him. After all, he'd had no business stealing me and bringing me up as his own.

The brothers kept an eye on her at school. Five wild Tremblays—Lucien, Paul, Rene, Pierre, Antoine. They'd kill you if you told.

They'd kill you even if you said something to someone else. You could never find out who else had been warned. Everyone, you guessed. Because anybody could see what she was. Anyone could blurt it out.

You couldn't take a chance. Even if you said, "Look at the squaw scratching her bum," it could be to someone who might tell her and you'd be to blame. Nettie Tremblay would go nuts and kill herself. And the brothers would rip off your head.

You'd never get off the school bus alive. And if you did, you'd never run fast enough to get home. And if you did, they'd climb in through your bedroom window and smother you with your pillow. After they'd pulled all your teeth, and cut off your dick. Paul Tremblay was sixteen, still in Grade Five, a hundred and seventy pounds. He could do that all himself, while the others sawed off your toes.

If you whispered for Nettie to lend an eraser, you could see Pierre trying to hear what you said.

If you looked too long at Nettie, you'd find Miss Percy glaring. She wasn't as scary as the Tremblay brothers but she folded her arms like a sentry on guard, her face clenched up like a fist. Paul Tremblay asked her to a movie once, but she laughed. So he rammed his elbow into Warner Hilton's nose. It was a blood bath. Miss Percy mopped it up.

There were no more lessons about life in an Indian village. No more stories about ravens. We learned about Incas and Mayans instead. They threw maidens into wells but never set foot on this island.

You couldn't even be mean, not without risking your life. When Neil Saunders made a face behind Nettie's back, the brothers dragged him into the woods and beat him up. Then they took off his clothes and left him behind a tree. They stuffed his pants and shirt down the toilet but passed his underpants around on a stick.

Nettie Tremblay didn't notice. She might have been the only person in class. She did her work. She ate her lunch. She smiled and nodded if you said a few words but she acted like someone who lived in a world with glass around it.

You'd think being so protected would make her proud. But she didn't stand with her gaze on the horizon, like an Iroquois princess waiting for the warriors to come home. She walked with her head tilted down, her eyes on the ground. She scuffed along with one pigeon-toed foot in front of the other. She wasn't like an Indian at all, not the Indians we'd read about in books. Not the Indians Miss Percy had told us about in her lessons on *Our Proud Neighbours*.

Nettie Tremblay didn't know how much trouble we went to, to keep her ignorant and safe, or she might have tried a little harder. After a while you wondered if she was worth it.

She was different on Saturdays, though. She talked a blue streak while she helped. She didn't want to be a movie star any more, she wanted to be a nurse. She'd be a nurse for a while and then a doctor, in a giant city hospital.

Her brothers didn't follow when she came across the road. It was because they trusted me, my dad said. The Tremblays knew what sort of people we were, over here.

One day she showed up at the bus shelter wearing glasses. Purple frames. Who ever heard of an Indian wearing glasses?

Why are you wearing those things?

So I can see, she said.

You could see before.

Doctor says I'm short-sighted, like Miss Percy.

She pushed them up with her thumb. She didn't have enough nose to keep them from sliding down.

Four eyes, they called her when we got to school, but not where her brothers could hear.

Goggle face.

Everyone wearing glasses was called something. It didn't count.

The next day she showed up at the bus shelter wearing lipstick as well as the glasses. She'd never worn lipstick before. No girl in our class wore lipstick, you had to be thirteen or fourteen for that. It didn't make her look pretty, it made her look dumb.

Does your mother know you painted your face? I said.

My mother's the one put it on.

She opened her lunch bag and showed me a lipstick tube next to her sandwiches. Maybe her mother wanted to make her feel better about wearing glasses.

War paint, I said.

It makes you look cheap, Eleanor Laitinen said. The Tremblay brothers weren't close enough to hear. They'd murder Eleanor if they'd heard her, even if she was a girl.

You better wipe it off before we get to school, I said. You don't want to look like a tramp.

Tramp was my dad's word for women who painted themselves up and smoked and swung their purses. My mother had not been a tramp, but she'd thought she was too good for us and went off to live somewhere else.

It didn't really make her look like a tramp. Tramps were supposed to be pretty, even if they looked cheap. She probably thought the lipstick made her look pretty but it didn't. She needed someone smarter than those brothers to protect her. She'd make a fool of herself.

I sat beside her on the bus. Her brothers sat at the back, but you could be sure they kept an eye open. You had to be careful they didn't hear. Lucien. Paul. Rene. Antoine. Pierre.

It doesn't suit you, I said. It doesn't look nice on you the way it does on some girls.

She looked out the window.

You're not old enough, I said.

She pulled in both her lips as though she might swallow them. This flattened her nose. She had to push her glasses up again.

You don't want people to laugh at you, I said you're not like Shelley Price.

Shelley Price was fourteen, six grades ahead of us. She was blonde, and pretty. She was the first girl to wear nylon stockings to school.

Drop dead, she said. I'll do what I want. Go sit somewhere else.

I hated her. She didn't even know how lucky she was. I didn't *have* to feel sorry for her. Let them laugh, if she was going to be like that.

West Coast Indians aren't real Indians, I told my dad that night. Charlie Morris said they came from China on a raft.

That must've been some raft, my dad said. I'd like to see it.

I'd rather be an Algonquin, I said.

Good idea, my dad said. You'll be closer to Ottawa. You can dance for the Great White Father when he's in town. Tell him he's welcome to a night on the kitchen cot if he's ever short of funds in this neck of the woods.

The whole south slope of the barn roof was covered with bark. Slabs were nearly dry enough. Some had curled up, and cracked when I stomped on them. Their colour was a dark red now—dried blood. I thought of the little bottles, for people who couldn't go to the toilet without some help.

From the peak of the barn I could look out over the small green field. The pig's smelly pen was below. Our house had not been painted since some time before I was born. Flecks of white were stuck here and there on the weather-blackened boards. My dad was going to paint it one day soon.

When Nettie came across the field I said I didn't need her today.

You can go home. My dad didn't cut any trees.

She came up the ladder anyway.

You want me to go so you won't have to pay me, she said.

Maybe that's why she'd kept coming over. She wouldn't talk to me at school any more but she talked to me while we worked. Money.

Not true, I said.

She came up the roof on all fours, and sat on the peak beside me. She didn't wear lipstick on weekends, but she wore her glasses every day.

How rich will I be? she said.

I don't know. My dad never said how much they pay.

How do you know you'll get any of it?

He gives me an allowance.

Most of it's gonna be mine.

Not most.

You said fifty cents for every day I helped.

I didn't say that.

You did so.

You didn't help all day, you only helped for a couple of hours each time. When you got bored you went home.

He won't pay you anyway, she said. You won't get any allowance, he needs the money for groceries. Daddy says you're only a step away from the poorhouse over here.

Whaddaya mean by that?

Just look at this place, she said. Daddy says a man with one arm and a wooden leg could make better use of it than your father does.

You're lying, I said. My Dad's always been nice to Mr. Tremblay.
He says if you were Catholics the priests would take you away from
your father and put you in a home.

That's dumb, I said.

They would.

Nobody's going to take me away from my dad.

You don't know everything. Maybe somebody will.

No.

Somebody could be coming to get you right now. You don't know
everything.

Yeah? I know something.

What?

I know something you don't know, I said.

What?

Something about yourself.

What?

If I tell you, you have to promise you won't tell anyone else. You have
to promise you won't tell anyone that I told you.

It was like standing on the edge of a cliff. She was at my mercy. She
had always been at my mercy. One word and over she'd go. Nothing
would be the same.

What is it? she said. I won't believe you anyhow. You lie.

I won't tell you then.

Tell me.

Promise?

Okay, I promise. What is it?

What do you think you are?

Whaddaya mean?

What kind of ancestors do you think you have? Do you think you're a
Swede?

Don't be stupid, she said. She laughed.

The priest brought you here from somewhere. Didn't you ever ask?

She went away from behind her eyes again. She didn't deserve to
know. I wouldn't tell her. She could be a Haida princess. She could be de-
scended from Big Bear. She could be Sitting Bull's niece. But she didn't
deserve to know. Let her think she was just an ordinary girl who looked
silly in glasses and stupid wearing lipstick.

What do you think you know? she said.

Nothing.

You better tell me, you think you're so smart.

I don't.

She stood up and hit me across the head with a slab of bark.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

She hit me again and again. Then she scrambled down the roof and turned to go down the ladder. Stupid stupid stupid. She knows, doesn't she? I said to my dad. I bet she's known all along.

I suppose she must've, he said.

We were filling the burlap bags, for the trip to the depot in town. Nine sacks. First we'd broken the dried bark into smaller pieces.

And you knew she did too, I said.

I suppose I did.

So why'd you tell me not to tell her?

Everybody was told not to tell her. Do you think if they'd just asked everybody not to call her names they wouldn't? Did you hear anyone call her names?

No.

And why is that, do you think?

Because of the brothers.

The brothers aren't always there. The brothers wouldn't be in the girls' washroom, for instance. Do you think anyone ever called her things in the washroom?

I guess not.

I guess not, he said. Do you know why people would've called her names, if they had?

I don't know, I said. To make her cry? To make themselves feel better'n her?

I'll tell you why they didn't, he said. Because they were part of a conspiracy. They didn't have to call her names, they could feel superior just by being part of a plot to keep her from knowing the facts. Them Tremblays are not so dumb.

The gunny sacks leaned against one another with their tops gaping open. My dad began to tie them closed with binder twine.

Was anything said between you? he said.

No.

Then leave it up to her. Maybe she'll go to school in beaded moccasins one day and tell you to call her Laughing Squirrel.

It isn't fair, I said.

Maybe she'd agree with you there, he said.

What would they do if I wore animal skins to school and told them to call me Mighty Warrior?

They'd laugh in your face.

What would they say?

Worse than they'd ever say to Nettie Tremblay, I'll tell you that. Maybe they'd just tell you to your face what they say behind your back.

This was something new. My skin felt funny and cold.

What do they say behind my back?

Maybe there's more than one plot out there, I bet you never thought of that. Maybe there's a plot to keep you from finding out something too. Do you think there's something they could say about us, if they decided they didn't give a hoot for your feelings?

He winked. We're not so dumb either, is what he meant. We know who we are.

I don't know, I said.

You don't? Then they must have a better grip on their tongues than I thought.

Anyway, I said, it wouldn't be my fault.

He laughed. Poor thing, stuck with your old man. C'mon, let's get these buggers onto the truck.

I could have killed him. I could run off to look for my mother. It wasn't fair. I was the one who should have been related to Big Bear. I was the one who ought to be Sitting Bull's son. You can be sure I'd stand up and give them a fight. I'd chase the white people right off the land, I'd drive them into the sea. I'd make them all go back to Ireland where they'd have nothing to eat but rotted spuds and rain, where you could die just from being poor.

Elva Macías

Solicitud

Días de tímido diluvio.
Atrévete a salir llovizna,
atrévete a mojarme.
Si destruyes mi huella porque no la toleras
y no hace muecas el sol sobre mi cara
y cuido de mi abrigo,
¿para qué los pies se atropellan
en el camión a diario?
Donde canciones de castigados amores
valen a veces veinte
a veces diez centavos,
donde mi codo roza la agudeza
de un paraguas negro de serviciales duelos
y mi solicitud cede el asiento a una anciana
que me premia con su clerical revista.
Me hacen sudar las manos los ejemplos.
Me bajo antes de la esquina
y camino angustiada.
¿Qué puedo hacer con estas moralejas?

translated by Caroline J. Davis

Solicitude

Days of shy downpours.
I dare you to quit drizzling,
I dare you to wet me.
If you wipe out my footprint because you can't stand it
and the sun doesn't grimace all over my face
and I take good care of my raincoat,
what do my feet trip along for
every day on the bus?
Where songs of suffering love
are worth sometimes twenty
sometimes ten cents,
where my elbow rubs up against the point
of a black funeral umbrella, and my solicitude
gives up a seat for an old lady
who rewards me with her religious magazine.
The articles make my hands sweat.
I get off before the corner
and walk along, worried.
What can I do with these moralities?

Blood Noise

Will Baer

I.

It is close to midnight. A studio apartment with shadows. Hardwood floors and bare walls. At far end is an unmade bed beneath a barred window. Slash of light falls from open bathroom door. Sound of water running. At near end is living and kitchen area. A breakfast table with two chairs. Pete sits at the table with his eyes closed. He wears a cheap blue suit. His head is shaved. In the living area is an armchair, heavy and dark red. A broken rocking chair and small coffee table. A loveseat in centre, facing a large old-fashioned television set. On top is a fat black and grey cat, asleep. The television screen has been smashed to bits. Among the dark chunks of glass lies an ordinary household hammer. Ginger comes out of bathroom, a cigarette in one hand. She has thick black hair, tied in a knot. Pale yellow skin and no jewelery. She is anorexic in appearance. She begins to pace, circling toward Pete. He turns slightly in his chair. His right cheek is swollen, bruised. He holds an unlabeled pint bottle of clear liquid.

Sound of Ginger's bare feet, then stop.

Are you going to answer me, she says.

A brief silence. Pete opens the bottle, drinks. Begins coughing.

This is shit, he says.

I hope it kills you, she says.

Pete looks at her. I'm sorry.

She spits at him. Thin white streak appears on his lapel.

I dream about you dying, she says.

He looks away from her.

*

the dream goes like this. You lie on your belly, face to the floor. Circles of smoke from cigarettes. Windows of light mingle with dust. Your shoulder is sunburned and I peel the loose skin. Lift tissue flesh to the light and it

glows like oil. Soft as a condom. I play with it. I see you in the burn ward.
The doctors say sixty percent of body surface is third degree

*

and your face is a bubble of skin with a slime coat. Left ear black and
shaped like a fist. One finger hovers over morphine button. Hands
blister-thin purple from slapping fire. Your thighs and ass burned terribly.
Sticking to plastic sheet. Nurse lifts you for bedpan and there is a tearing
noise. You try to laugh. But your hair is gone and you don't recognize
your own dick. It is burned like an egg

*

then I am in a parked car with your brother. Seth. He is at the wheel
looking through windshield. He tells me you died at 1:09 a.m. in hospital.
I'm in backseat and my legs are asleep. In the rearview mirror he has
your face.

Cry if you want to, he says.

I take off my clothes. I want you to fuck me, I say.

He laughs at me with your voice. There is a gun beside me on seat. It's a
toy gun but looks real.

I hold it to his head and pull the plastic trigger. Blue sky explosion and he
starts the car

*

Do you have a cigarette, Pete says.

Ginger shrugs. A knock at the door and she goes to answer it.

Pete still coughing. Slapping his pockets for cigarettes. Ginger opens
door. Her lips part to a sneer as a man enters the room. He holds a gun at
waist level. He is barefoot, with a bloodsoaked bandana wrapped around
the left foot. Ginger closes the door behind him. He crosses the room and
Ginger looks down. The bloodied foot leaves one-legged marks like hoof-
prints on the floor.

Pete stands up. Do you have a cigarette, he says.

The man clears his throat. No. I ain't.

Ginger. Give me one, Pete says.

She doesn't answer.

What's in the bottle, the man says.

Pete holds it to the light. Whiskey, he says. Home style.

Shine. How's it drink.

Not bad. A bit oily.
Let's have some, then. If you're of a mind.
Pete takes a step and gives him the bottle. The man unscrews the cap,
glares at Pete.
Not so close now, he says.
He wipes mouth of bottle and takes a small drink.
That's some okay stuff, he says. Gives bottle back to Pete, who goes
over to kitchen area and is heard clattering dishes.
He sits down in armchair.
He lays gun on thigh, then aims a finger at Ginger. She still stands at the
door.
Boom, he says. Fall down. You're dead.
Ginger doesn't move.

*

I'm Uncle Billy, he says. What's your name.
Ginger, she says.
He points at rocking chair. Sit down then, he says. Like folks do.
Pete comes back with ice and coffee cups. Pours them each a drink.
Uncle Billy looks around.
What's the matter with this TV, he says.
It's broken, says Ginger. I broke it.
I was late, says Pete.
Uncle Billy laughs. They drink.

*

What do you want, says Pete.
Uncle Billy picks up gun and twirls it.
I killed four people down the hall, he says. Killed two, then two more.
Ginger bangs her drink down, spilling it. Jesus, she says. Why.
So they wouldn't wake up, Billy says. Then the other two come home.
Ginger folds her hands in her lap and stares at the TV.
Pete shakes his head. We didn't hear any shots.
Uncle Billy grins. Used a pillow.
How'd you do that to your foot.
Put it clean through a fancy glass coffee table.
I guess you lost your shoes.
Uncle Billy is rubbing his leg with the gun.
I took em off so as they wouldn't hear me. I was robbin em, wasn't I, he
says.
I guess you were, says Pete. You're going to kill us, then.

Ginger closes her eyes. Why are you even talking to him, she says.
Why not talk to him, says Pete. He's here. And it's a good question.
He looks at Uncle Billy, who looks at his gun.
I might, he says. I might. Don't much feel like it though. And I only got
one bullet left anyhow.
Seems like that gun would hold at least six bullets.
Well, shit. Only had five to start with.
Ginger opens eyes. What do you want then.
I don't exactly know, he says.
One thing I don't want is to go down on the street and my foot bleedin like
it is.
Might be we have something to put on it, says Pete. Ginger will go look
in the bathroom. Won't you, dear. He smiles.
She hesitates. A tendon in her neck. Then she turns, walks into the dark.
Her feet can be heard padding on the wood floor.
Uncle Billy looks sly. They a telephone back there.
In the bathroom, says Pete. No. That's the only one, under the table.
Billy kicks the receiver off the hook. The dial tone is a faint hum.

*

What's you name.
Pete.
I'm Uncle Billy. She your wife.
Sort of. Look what she did to my TV. She loves me though.
Billy nods. Well, now. That look like a nice TV. Now you ain't got one.
What in hell is wrong with the woman.
Pete waves a hand. Nothing wrong with her. She does get tense.
Paranoid sometimes.
Oh, yeah. I know the kind, says Billy. Crazy.
I'd say killing four people is crazy. If that's what you did.
Uncle Billy points the gun at him. What's that supposed to mean.
Sorry. Where's the stuff you stole, then.
What. Fuck you, boy. I stashed it.
Stashed it. Huh. Pete nods. Where.
Billy's mouth twitches. I think you want to change the subject before I
shoot you in the face.
Sorry. Forget about it. Whose uncle are you.
What's that.
Do you have some nephew somewhere.
Uncle Billy lowers the gun. You're a funny fella. Where's your TV
smashin wife at.
She's not really my wife.

*

Ginger returns.

She carries a bowl of water, a dry towel, a roll of gauze, a bottle of peroxide. Her eyes are touched with shadow and her lips fat with dark lipstick.

Uncle Billy stares at her. What were you doing back there so long.

She bends to unload the medical things, then hangs up the telephone.

I took some aspirin, if you don't mind.

Pete dumps more whiskey in his cup. And you look beautiful, he says.

She smiles without teeth and offers Uncle Billy the bowl of water.

Now what is that for, he says.

To wash off your foot, she says.

Billy points the gun at her. First get that shit off your face, he says.

Excuse me.

He shuts his eyes. You look like a whore. I never trust a woman with a mouth painted up like that.

Wash it off now. Look just like a damn whore.

Ginger dips towel into water, rubs her mouth and eyes. Her lips now appear bruised. She shoves the bowl and water spills onto the table.

Uncle Billy wiggles the gun. No, he says. You gonna do my foot.

Why should I.

Because I ask you. And you seem a nice girl. I can tell that.

Ginger looks at Pete, then clicks on a bright white lamp. She kneels on the floor in front of Billy and unwraps the bloody foot. Pete takes a cigarette from her pack.

She looks up. The foot has glass in it.

Uncle Billy lifts the foot to look at it. Well.

Pete blows smoke. You need to get that glass out. Else it's gonna turn black and fall off like a turd.

Ginger, says Billy. Let me see your hand.

She hold out her right hand and Billy leans close. She has long white nails on the thumb and first two fingers.

Uncle Billy nods.

You can dig the glass out easy with these, he says.

Ginger pulls her hand away. That's too much. You go fuck yourself.

She starts to get up and Billy pushes the gun in her face.

*

I am serious, Billy says. I'm serious as I can be.

Her lips are parted. Pete, she says.

He is cooling one black eye with his coffee cup.

I'm sorry, he says. The lipstick was your idea.
Uncle Billy waves the gun. I'd like not to shoot either of you. It's just some strange blood and tore up flesh. He points at Pete. You'd do it if it was his foot.
Ginger laughs, briefly. Is that right, Pete.
She wouldn't spit on my foot.
Neither here nor there, says Billy.
Ginger looks at her nails. This is going to hurt, she says.
I expect it will. I'd like some more that shine.
Pete refills his own cup then slides the bottle across the table.
Ginger bends over the foot. Pete stands and begins to pace.
There is silence for a minute.

*

The light shines hot in Uncle Billy's face. Pete begins to talk as he circles them.
I'm trying to visualize this, he says. Uncle Billy, you say you took off your shoes and broke in on some people down the hall. What apartment was this.
Billy shudders. At the end. On the left.
That would be Jones. He works in the bookstore. And his friend, what's his name. They were in bed, sleeping, and you shot them with a pillow for a muffler. Then you started looking for valuable shit and they didn't have anything.
That's right. Uncle Billy spits. Two queer boys.
Yes. One bullet each. Then two other people came in and you say you killed them too. One bullet left. Because you only had five. How'd you happen to step through the coffee table.
One of em tried to fight me, says Billy.
Pete stares at him. Jones has a little dog, doesn't he Ginger. Did you see the dog, Billy.
It was up under the couch pissin itself. Listen, what's your problem. Uncle Billy's face is bright with sweat under the light. Ginger picks methodically at the skin of his heel. Blood trickles to her wrist.
His ankles are white.
No problem, says Pete. A minute ago you said you stashed the stolen shit. Now these poor dead bastards don't have anything. And one thing they don't have is a fucking dog.
Only cats in this building, says Ginger.
I don't want to talk about it, Billy says.
I'm sorry, Pete says. I'm just thinking, maybe these people are still alive.

If so you might be in less trouble. He blows thin smoke from his nose. You know. Attempted murder. I'm tellin you they are dead as shit and I want you to shut up talking about it. Uncle Billy is shaking. His lips pull back to show teeth. You're drunk as a damn dog, he says. Pete stops and his hand falls on Billy's shoulder. I'm not drunk. I'm not drunk at all. He raises his voice. Am I drunk, Ginger. I don't think so, she says. Uncle Billy throws off the hand. Don't touch me, boy. Sorry. What's the matter. Just don't ever touch me. You don't want to do that. He looks at Ginger. Are you done with my foot, woman.

*

I'm finished, she says. Ginger sits on the edge of the coffee table. She lights a cigarette and lets it dangle in her smeared hand. Pete still stands behind Uncle Billy. The light still shining in his face. Get hell away from me. Billy swings the gun. You two so close on me I can't hardly breathe. Pete steps back. I think you're lying about something, Billy. About the guys you killed or your foot. The bullet. Definitely the dog. Uncle Billy jerks the gun up. Sayin I'm a liar. Pete is quiet. Ginger blows smoke. I fixed your foot. Why don't you go home. Uncle Billy don't lie, he says. Go home, she says. We're tired of you. I ain't worried bout that. Stop talking at me now. Uncle Billy leans forward, switches off the lamp. Shadows fall on his face and he stares back at Ginger. Fine, she says. I'm going to make some coffee for the police. Pete laughs. Now that's a good idea. Uncle Billy lowers the gun. I just need to think a minute. You know I think she's right, says Pete. The cops are liable to kick in our door any minute. Billy looks at him. I don't think so. No, sir. Why not. Because the door to that place is locked. Those boys don't have no phone

and nobody gonna miss em. Be a while yet fore they come to stink. Nobody knows a thing about it but the two of you.
I got the gun. I got the answers.

*

Uncle Billy rests his hurt foot on the table and leans back. The gun on his thigh. Pete sits down and reaches for the whiskey. Ginger stands by the sink. There is the noise of coffee brewing. She examines her bloody hands.

I wish we could turn on the TV, she says.

Her shirt is damp with sweat and she pulls it off, drops it to the floor. She wears a black bra.

She is bony and her ribs show. Her breasts are small.

I'm going to take a bath, she says.

Pete doesn't answer. Uncle Billy stares at her.

II.

The rocking chair creaks irregularly. From the bathroom comes sound of water and Ginger humming. Billy sits in the armchair. Pete in the rocker. The loveseat between them, facing the TV.

That girl. She got a mouth on her, says Uncle Billy.

She does. Pete smokes.

I like a woman got spirit. How long you been with her.

About a year, I guess.

What the matter boy. Uncle Billy grins. Sound little bit blue.

Nothing, says Pete.

Well. Tell me how you got them shiners.

I was in the drunk tank last night.

No, shit. Cops done that.

Not the cops. Pete looks at his empty cup.

Pass the bottle, he says.

Did some old boy get hard on you.

It was three guys. They wanted these boots.

Pete lifts one leg to show a scuffed black cowboy boot.

Nice, says Billy. Look like genuine leather.

Shit. They cost me a hundred bucks.

Is that right.

Pete drinks, rocking slightly. Back and forth.

*

What all happened, says Uncle Billy.

They jumped me. I wouldn't give up the boots and they beat me. One of em I fucked up.

That's a kind of funny story.

I'm not laughing.

Well, I wonder, says Uncle Billy. What is three fellas gonna do with one pair of boots.

What do you mean, says Pete.

I mean maybe is there some more to that story.

Like what. Pete stops rocking and stares at him.

I'm sure I don't know. I wasn't there.

Long silence.

Pete gets up, goes to the sink. The water is a slow trickle and he refills the ice trays. Billy stares at the TV. The cat is still asleep. Billy begins to talk.

*

and I been in the joint myself. Runs in the family. My pa was public drunk the night I was born. The doctor pulled on me too hard broke my collar-bone. Got soft bones ever since. My ma swore it was because doctor was a fundamental christian and he didn't abide the modern technique. She would get drunk and cuss his sorry name then like as not she would start to beatin on me

*

cryin, she's cryin the whole entire time, cryin real quiet like she's watchin a movie on the TV and a potato chip in her hand she forgot was there. Her face turnin black from tears runnin through her make-up. And her hands smelled like rubbing alcohol, she was always washing her feet with it when they cramped up. Now I always wonder what a woman's hands smell like. Soon as I meet her I'm wantin to smell her hands. Some think it rude. Your wife, her hands smell like a cigarette. My own hands mostly smell like dirt. And I have broken every finger. Some time or another. Once I was in the showers and tried to hit my buddy, tried to hit his jaw but I slipped in the wet and my fist hit the wall, broke four my fingers

*

of course I do like to think I can start a woman to cryin, cryin like nobody's business. I could make your wife cry just lookin at her. Make it interesting. I bet you five dollars I can make her cry. What do you say. Do

you have five dollars. I know you do. Let's go, then. She been back there too long as is. Must be lonely. But show me five dollars first

*

In the bathroom.

A lightbulb flickers over the sink. The mirror is cracked. The floor is white and slanted. The bathtub is long and deep with claw feet. Pete sits against the wall beside the tub. Uncle Billy sits on the toilet, his legs crossed and the gun in his hand.

The cat is awake now and crouches in the doorway. Ginger is underwater. The dreadlocks float in a swarm at her shoulders. Arms and legs distorted in bent light. Black pubic hairs rise and coil between her legs.

She can hold her breath forever, says Pete.

We got time. Plenty of it, says Billy.

Then silence.

*

Ginger comes up for air. Water breaking over her face, then climbing the walls of the tub. She opens her eyes and stares at Pete. She doesn't speak.

Sorry about this, says Uncle Billy. Wanted to talk with you.

Ginger touches the nipple of one breast. Her arm hides the other.

I masturbated, she says. It was amazing. Deadly in fact.

Pete's face is blank.

Don't talk nasty, says Billy. He don't mind but I do.

What did you want to talk about. She reaches for the soap.

Uncle Billy looks at his gun.

How did you all meet, he says.

*

I wasn't normal when Pete found me. I couldn't talk. He took me home. He fucked me on the floor and it was nasty. He made noises then he went to sleep. I was naked and awake. The door was locked and the cat was following me around in circles. I was afraid of it. I couldn't sleep. I watched Pete sleep. I didn't know his name. He was beautiful I thought. But his face kept changing shapes. He was dream travelling. Visiting the dead. Then the cat was on the bed with me. I heard it growling. I couldn't move and sat like that for hours.

*

was at the jazz fest a year ago. Down on the river. The sun was a nightmare and she was freaking. I almost tripped over her. Spilled my beer. Her clothes were half off and her eyes swollen up. Cooking in her skull. She was trying to crunch herself into a puddle of shadow the size of your head. She was a tangle of black hair and brown shoulders. And skinny but vicious as hell. Like I had found a dog. I tried to help her up and she fucking bit me. I should have known better. But I gave her some water and talked her down. The sex was brilliant

*

then I don't remember. All of a sudden it was morning. I was still sitting against the wall. Pete woke up blinking. It was bright. He rolled over and reached out to touch me. Oh fuck Jesus, he said. He moved away from me and I saw what he saw. Blood and cat shit on the bed and on me. On my thighs and stomach. Then I was in the bathroom throwing up. Pete followed me. He put me in the bathtub and cleaned my body. Soap and hot water like drugs to my skin. He held me and said it was okay. He was sweet to me. He gave me clothes and fed me. He asked me what my name was

*

but none of it was real. I woke up and her arms were scratched open, red and raw. The sheets were fucked with blood. She was rocking back and forth and chewing on her lips. The cat was under the bed. It didn't come out for two days and she thought it was dead. I thought it was bad acid and she would be normal if I gave her time. Like a girlfriend. But she isn't. We don't have missionary sex. We do things to each other. She masturbates all the time. In bed beside me. The only time she comes. She says I should try to humiliate her. I rape her in her sleep. I fuck her in the ass, in the face. She says think of something else

*

Uncle Billy wipes his mouth.

Do you love her, he says.

Pete looks at his hands. Sometimes, he says.

Ginger. What about you, Billy says. Do you love him. I want to know do you love him.

Do I love him. She looks at Pete. She moves the soap along one leg.
Oh yes, she says.
Pete lights a cigarette from Ginger's pack. The smoke is blue.
If a woman is in love, says Billy. She ought not need to satisfy herself.
Ginger doesn't look at him. She plays with the soap.
Every woman does it sometime, she says. Little girls and little old ladies.
Mothers and daughters.
Uncle Billy raises the gun. Put that damn soap in your mouth.
She laughs. I don't think so.
Do it or I shoot you. Here and now. Whore.
Ginger hesitates. Then she rubs the soap across her lips.
Uncle Billy points the gun at Pete. Kiss him, now. On the mouth.
What for, she says.
I said to kiss him. If you love him.
But I have soap on my mouth.
Fuck that. I want him to taste it.
Ginger moves to a crouch. Strings of water run from her hair. Pete
doesn't move. She leans to kiss him. He opens his mouth to bite her lip,
softly. He lifts one hand to wipe the soap from her mouth. She kisses him
again and he moves his hand to touch her breast.
That's enough, now. Turn him loose. Billy stands up and moves toward
them.
Pete leans back against the wall.
Uncle Billy puts the gun between Ginger's eyes. Get up, girl. I want you
to kiss me now.
She looks at Pete.
It's okay, he says.
Ginger stands up, her skin shining yellow and wet
Hip bones like knots of rope. Shadow of ribs. She has small white scars
across her belly, wrinkled and swollen from the water.
Uncle Billy hesitates and she grabs for his throat.
She kisses him, violently, and he pulls away. Ginger sinks back into the
water and wraps her arms around herself.
Now get the fuck out, she says. Both of you.
Uncle Billy's upper lip is bleeding.
Scars on her, he says. Looking at Pete. What are them scars from.
Pete takes a towel from the shelf, gives it to Ginger. Her eyes are wild
and bright.
Scars on her stomach, says Uncle Billy. I seen them.
Billy. Billy, says Pete. Leave her alone.
Silence except for drip of water. Pete drops his cigarette in the toilet.
She doesn't cry easy, he says.

Uncle Billy turns. Blood on his chin.
No, he says. I guess not.

III.

The cat returns to its place on the television. It begins to clean itself, growling with teeth in fur. Pete turns on the radio. Gospel singing mixed with static. Uncle Billy sits in the rocking chair.

He wipes his bleeding mouth with one hand. Then again. Pete pours coffee into three cups and adds whiskey. He gives one to Billy. Ginger comes out of the bathroom, hair hanging wet on her shoulders. Now she wears a blue shirt, open at the throat. Black leggings with a hole in one knee. She stands at the sink, blowing into her cup. The music becomes a dirge.

Ginger puts her cup down. I want to dance, she says.

Pete looks at Uncle Billy, who is staring at the cat. Pete shrugs and puts one arm around Ginger's waist.

They move across the floor. Billy wipes his mouth and watches them.

*

They drift in a ragged waltz. Ginger's feet are still wet, leaving small prints in the dust. Pete holds her stiffly. She looks over his shoulder at Billy.

Pete gave me those scars, she says.

Uncle Billy doesn't answer. Pete's face is hidden in Ginger's hair.

With a cigarette, she says. And on my feet.

Ginger, says Pete.

He likes to do things to girls, she says. That's how he got the black eyes. He was touching a girl on the streetcar and she didn't like it. Girl started yelling and the streetcar was full of people and some tourists were drunk and started beating on him.

She's lying, Pete says.

It was the cops that saved his life.

Uncle Billy looks at his gun, then at Pete. You a pervert, he says.

The music stops but they still dance.

*

Pete sits on the floor. Billy doesn't look at him. In the kitchen Ginger is boiling a pot of water.

That true, says Billy. What she said.

No, says Pete.

I told you I did some time, Billy says. When I broke my hand in the showers. Molester is the lowest piece of trash in the house. One fella, we found out that's what he done. Some boys got together and castrated him with a guitar string. Never saw such blood, it was like bleedin a pig. He close to died.

It's not true, says Pete. I never touched a little girl.

What about her, says Billy. Them scars.

The cat jumps from the television. Pete lights a cigarette. Ginger smashes something in the sink and his shoulders twitch. Her back is to them.

Let's show him, she says. What we do.

She turns with a long curved piece of glass from a broken bottle. The cat begins to chase its tail. Ginger gives the piece of glass to Pete.

Let's show him, she says.

*

Pete crushes the glass under his boot. Ginger sits calmly on the floor. Pete goes to the kitchen and opens a drawer. He touches two knives together. He examines a fork.

Don't we have an ice-pick, he says.

No, she says.

Pete goes to the bathroom. He leaves the door open. There is a dull crashing noise. Then again.

The mirror, says Ginger.

Pieces of mirror can be heard falling into the sink. Then running water.

Pete comes out and goes to the bed. He sits down. I'm tired, he says.

Pete, says Ginger.

He rips a thin strip from the bedsheet, then wraps it carefully around the knuckles of his right hand.

He gets up and walks in a circle.

He comes toward them. I'm tired, he says.

Ginger looks at him.

Listen, Billy says.

Pete crouches in front of the TV. He pokes through the remains and selects a heavy chunk of dark glass with a rough edge.

*

Pete holds the piece of glass flat in his left hand. The cigarette in his mouth. Ginger sits cross-legged on the floor before him. Steam begins to

rise in the kitchen. Water runs over the edge of the pot with scalding noises. Ginger takes off her shirt, placing it aside. She doesn't wear a bra. Pete looks down at the glass in his hand. He blows smoke through his nose.

Ginger wets finger and thumb in her mouth. She softly strokes her left breast, making a close circle around the nipple.

Hold on now, Billy says.

Pete reaches with the glass. Ginger still touches her breast, pinching the nipple between fingers. He touches her lips with the glass, then draws a line across her collarbone. A mark appears but the skin doesn't break. Ginger rocks back and forth at the waist. She moves fingers to mouth again. Pete lowers the glass, pushes the sharp edge into the skin of her breast below the nipple. He flicks his wrist and a half moon of blood appears.

*

Ginger doesn't want to get blood on her shirt. The bra she wore earlier is under the table and she puts it on. A dark circle of blood the size of a coin forms in black lace. Pete is gone.

Uncle Billy sits very still in the rocker.

Did you like that, she says.

He doesn't look at her.

It's better, she says. When Pete is in the mood.

Did you like it, says Billy.

It was my idea, wasn't it.

Somethin is wrong with you, he says. Both of you.

No, she says. I don't think so.

It's not normal.

What is normal, she says.

I don't know. Somethin else.

Ginger lights a cigarette. Did you ever see your parents make love.

My daddy left when I was a baby.

But your mother must have had lovers.

I didn't watch them. I got respect. Besides it's nasty.

*

I have a home movie, she says. That my parents made of themselves.

Like a porno, you mean.

Do you want to watch it.

No, he says.

I could set up the projector. It's no trouble.

Billy stares at her now. Where is Pete, he says.

The quality is very poor, she says. Only one angle and they never kiss. Nothing like that.

The father slaps the mother until she falls over the bed. He pulls up her dress and rips her pantyhose. The mother doesn't resist. She just lies there and he puts it up her ass. She bleeds. The film is black and white and the blood is black. Then another man comes in but you never see his face. He does her too. When it's over the man and the father leave the room and she wipes herself off. The mother puts on clean panties. Then she walks over to the camera and turns it off.

And you watch that, Billy says. Like on the TV.

Sometimes, she says. I like the way she turns the camera off. Like it's the oven or something.

Where is Pete, says Billy.

In the bathroom. He gets sick after we do it.

What was the water boiling for.

Infection, she says.

Pete comes back. There is water on his mouth. He doesn't sit down.

The first time I did sex, he says.

*

was with a man. I was twelve, I think. I was in the park, hunting bottles for the nickel deposit. This man was sitting on a bench. He asked me if I wanted to make some easy money. Five dollars, he said. He smelled like he'd been sitting out in the rain. He wore a grey sweatshirt with the hood over his head. Five bucks was real money and he showed me the green pinched in his knuckles. I said okay and he took me to the bus station. No one was around except two old black men watching a soap opera. He said come on and went into the men's room. The bathroom had metal mirrors. They have those in jail, so no one can cut each other

*

make your face look like a person drowning. The floor was wet from a broken pipe. The hiss of water and the man wore football cleats. Noise like dropping rocks on the floor. He pushed me into the big stall at the end, the one for wheelchairs. I wasn't sure I wanted five bucks so bad. The man put his arm around me. His mouth was a hole. He was missing most of his front teeth. One of his eyes was clear blue, the other white and bloody. His hands big with curved nails. He touched my face, he kissed my lips. His breath was like something dead

*

the man pulled down his pants and said hold my fella. I had never seen a foreskin before. It made his dick look like a small hairless animal. It got hard in my hand. The hood peeled back and the face poked out. It pulsed like a fish trying to breathe. The man said pull on it, pull til it come. It was dry as leather and I pulled, forcing my hand up and down. Pull mother-fucker, he said. Pull on that fella. I felt something give and my hand was wet and I thought it was come. But the man was howling fuck goddamn shit boy and I opened my eyes. It was blood. The foreskin was torn like paper. The man held his bleeding dick in both hands, screaming and laughing. I pushed him and he went down twisting between the wall and the toilet. Then I was running, holding the bloody fist away from my body

*

Ginger smiles.

Uncle Billy, she says. Did you ever have sex with a man.

Lord, no. I never, he says. I never did.

It was years before I could. Masturbate properly, says Pete.

Ginger makes a noise in her throat. She picks up a bit of glass from the floor. She holds it close to her face, turning it to the light.

I thought I must be queer or something, says Pete.

Billy, says Ginger. I want to show you something.

Then I had sex with a boy, says Pete. I was in the ninth grade and we did it on his mother's couch.

Every Thursday when she played tennis. He had swimmer's muscles and was gentle. We got drunk and he showed me how to French kiss. His name was Johnny. I think he was in love with me but I never felt anything.

*

Ginger moves close to Uncle Billy. Do you see this, she says.

A piece of glass. I see it. Billy is pale and sweating and he holds his gun loosely. He licks the dried blood on his lip.

Pete puts a cigarette in his mouth. Then in the eleventh grade, he says. I managed to fuck a fat girl when I was drunk. After that everything was cool.

Do you notice anything about this glass, Ginger says.

Billy looks away from Pete. He studies the bit of glass between her fingers.

It's green, he says. It has some paper stuck on it.

That's right, she says.

Ginger. Give me a match, says Pete.

The paper is from a beer label, says Ginger. The bottle I broke in the sink.

Ginger, do you have a match, says Pete.

He closes his eyes. The unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth.

Ginger, he says.

I don't have a fucking match.

*

Billy moves the gun from one hand to the other.

The glass I took out of your foot, Ginger says. It wasn't green. But some of it had paper stuck to it. Like this. It wasn't from any coffee table.

Pete opens his eyes and looks at Uncle Billy.

It was a table I stepped through, Billy says.

No, says Ginger. It was a bottle.

What does it matter, Pete says.

She flicks away the bit of glass, looking at Billy. You were in a big hurry to get out of there. You forgot your shoes. It was dark and you stepped on a bottle.

I was in a hurry. That's the truth, Billy says.

You aren't even a thief.

Billy touches the gunbarrel to his mouth.

I had to kill those boys.

*

Pete lights his cigarette at the stove. Ginger watches Billy.

Where did you meet Jones, she says.

I killed him dead. With this gun.

There isn't a drop of blood on your shirt, she says.

It's not mine, he says.

Where did you meet Jones.

Billy wipes his mouth. I was drinking in a bar, he says. An old woman was playing on the piano. I was listening. The piano was pretty.

Ginger nods. But you didn't have any money, she says.

No. I had my own money.

Jones bought you a drink, she says. He is a nice guy.

I got some money. Uncle Billy stands up, then sits down again.

His friend was with him, Ginger says. Jones and his friend. They're mod-

estly domestic but sometimes they like the odd number in bed. Pete knows about that, she says.

Pete stands facing the shattered television, smoking. The hammer is at his feet.

What's the difference, he says. Leave him alone.

Ginger lies on her back, her arms crossed over her chest.

But this is a sad story, she says. It sounds just like the television.

Pete picks up the hammer. He smashes it against the floor.

What happened next, says Ginger.

Uncle Billy looks at the gun. His chin jerks up and down.

Jones asked if you wanted to go home with them, she says.

I went home with them. I thought I could get some money. Billy collapses backward in the chair, his knees together.

*

The apartment is dark, says Ginger. A few candles burning. There is music and you are alone with two men. One of them takes your shoes off. He strokes your feet. The other kisses your neck.

Touching my feet, Billy says. It's nasty.

The hammer hits the floor again. Uncle Billy groans.

Ginger sits up and turns to look at Pete. She holds up a book of matches.

He opens his mouth then closes it. Ginger lights a match and drops it to the floor.

Jones has a gun, she says. He showed it to me once. He keeps it on his bedside table. It isn't loaded, of course. It's for shock value.

She strikes another match.

Jones doesn't have bullets for his gun, she says. He told me.

Smoke rises from the dead match between Ginger's feet. She watches it.

Billy closes his eyes.

The cat returns to its place on the television.

*

Jones is taking his pants off, says Ginger. I think his friend is naked already. He's whispering to you. He wants your fingers in his ass. He wants you to suck him. He wants you to swallow him. And you freak. You pick up the gun and point it at Jones. He laughs and says it's not loaded.

Billy licks his lips. I pull that trigger, he says.

The gun only excites him, says Ginger. She lights a match. What do you do.

He wants me to touch him, Billy says. He wants me to take off my clothes. His friend is drunk and laughing. He's crazy.

What do you do, she says. She lights a match.
He's naked, Billy says. I hit him in his mouth with the gun. I hit him again.
His friend is laughing and screaming.
And you run, Ginger says. You step on a bottle. You knock on the first
door you see. Our door. Glass in your foot. And the gun still isn't loaded.

*

Uncle Billy holds the gun in both hands.
He fumbles with it, almost dropping it. He manages to break open the
cylinder.
There is a bullet in one chamber. He holds it up so she can see it. He
slides it back in and spins the cylinder with a flick of his finger. He snaps it
back in place and raises the barrel.
He aims at the sleeping cat.
There's no bullet, he says. Is there smart girl.
Billy don't, says Pete.
Uncle Billy pulls the trigger and the bolt clicks. It is a dry sound, like two
bones touching.
Pete swings the hammer with both hands. The claw crashes into Billy's
wrist and the gun hits the floor. Ginger picks it up. She looks at it. She
laughs out loud.
Billy makes a moaning noise, sucking on his lower lip. He looks at Pete.
I'm sorry, he says.
Billy cradles the broken wrist limply to his chest.
Ginger lifts the gun slowly. She points it at Pete.

Contributors

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Elva Macías was born in 1944 in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. She teaches at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City. The poems appearing in this issue are from two of her many books of poetry: *Far From Memory* and *Image and Resemblance*.

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Norman Ravvin's novel, *Cafe des Westens* (Red Deer College Press), won the Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism New Fiction Award. He has just completed a second novel, *Fat Tuesday*, which is set in Vancouver.

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are poor has increased from 1.1 billion to 1.5 billion. The number of people who are extremely poor has increased from 600 million to 800 million.

There are a number of reasons for this. One is that the world population has increased from 5 billion to 6 billion. Another is that the world economy has not grown fast enough to keep pace with the population increase. A third is that the world economy has grown, but the benefits have not been distributed evenly.

There are a number of ways in which the world economy can be made to grow faster. One is to increase the amount of capital invested in the world economy. Another is to increase the amount of research and development in the world economy. A third is to increase the amount of trade in the world economy.

There are a number of ways in which the benefits of the world economy can be distributed more evenly. One is to increase the amount of social services provided in the world economy. Another is to increase the amount of social insurance provided in the world economy. A third is to increase the amount of social justice provided in the world economy.

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Judge's Essay

Mark Anthony Jarman

Fiction

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Michael Fox
Jack Hodgins
Elise Levine
Rick Maddocks
Norman Ravvin

Poetry in Parallel Text

Elva Macías
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