

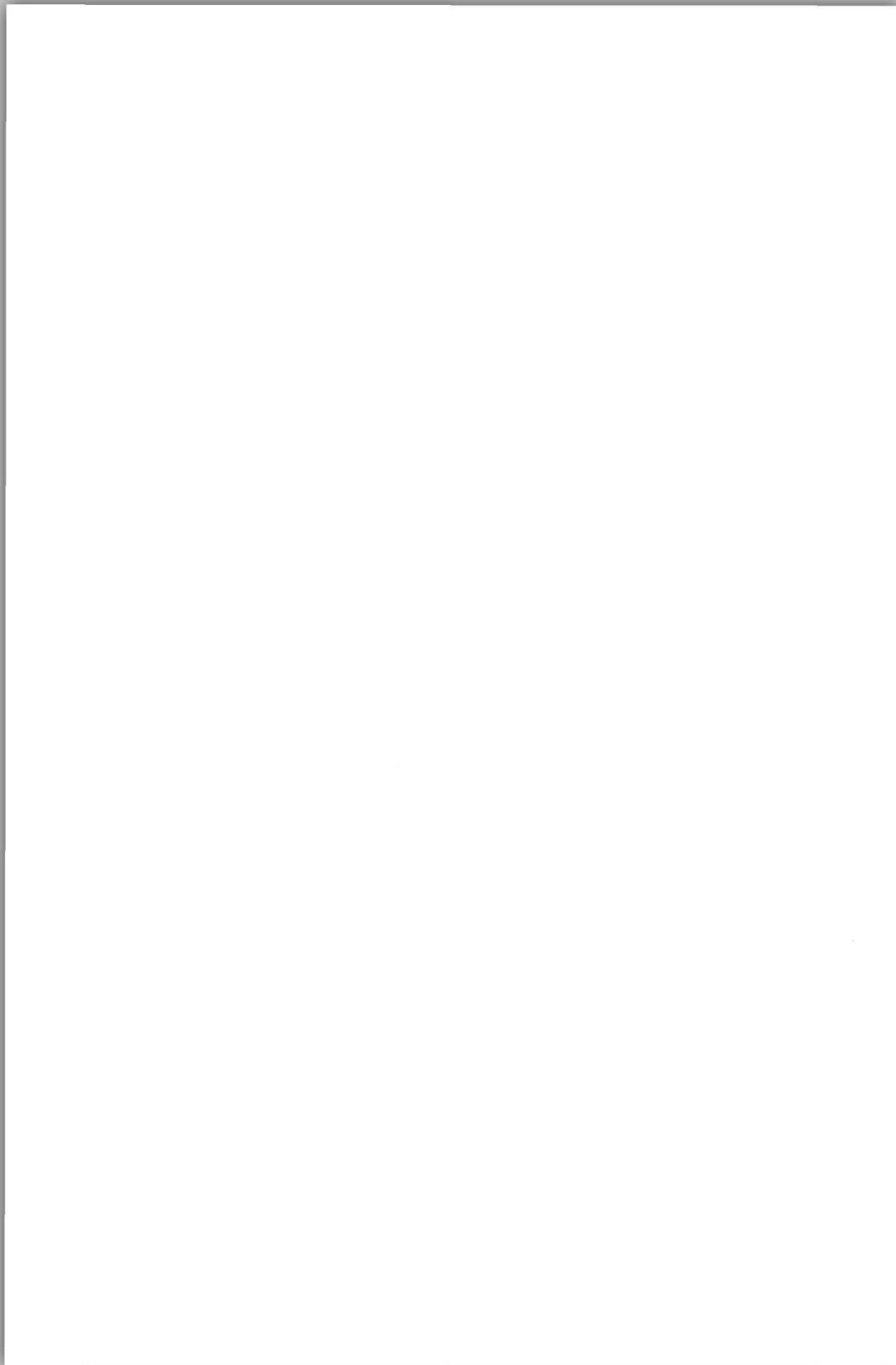
PRISM *international*

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A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF
CONTEMPORARY WRITING



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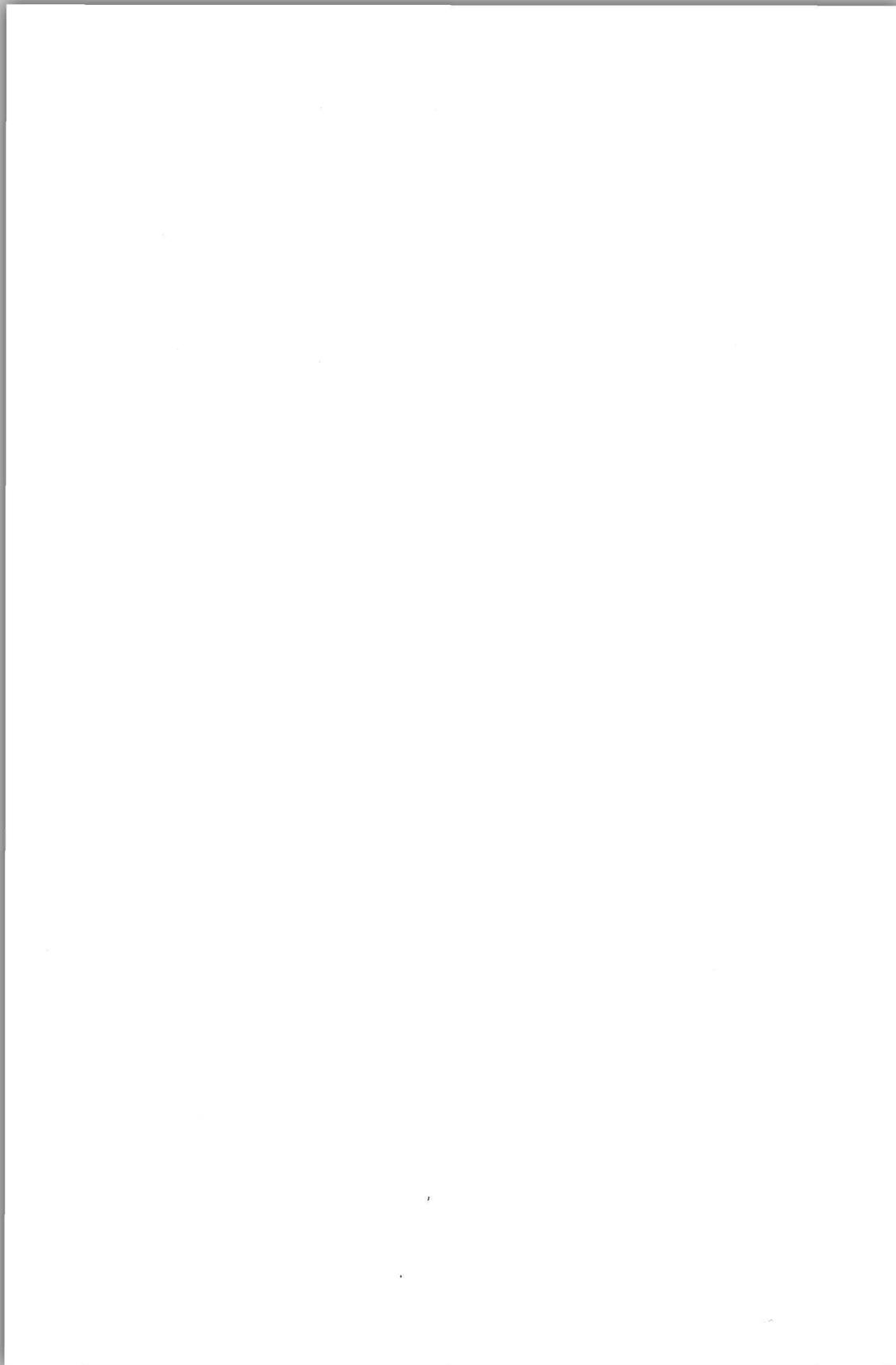
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Ernest Hekkanen

The Barb Arm King of the World

This is Tink: a middle-aged, sag-faced gnome, a potman in a die-casting factory. At the moment we find him squinting into the searing, orange glow of molten aluminum, as he drags a long-stemmed, steel spoon around the crumbling sides of the pot in order to gather up slag. His short arms stick out of a soiled undershirt that stretches over a vast mound of gut. His face bears a savage grin beneath the sweat and the grease, the narrow gap revealing an uneven row of orange-tipped teeth. He lifts out the slag and throws it into a metal barrel and digs back into the pot, never once forgetting to chew his gum: — this while his alter-ego, Commandant Tink, is off in the South Pacific, courting brown-skinned women beneath the high, waving fronds of palm trees, tropical breezes dancing in the short curls of his crotch, where an MX missile is emerging from its silo. Where have all the green tomorrows gone? Where the blazing white beaches and the velvet sunsets? Through the roar of burning propane, the chugging of compressors and the whir of overhead fans, the eight o'clock buzzer goes off. Prisoner Tink ejaculates spit. "Cock-sucker," he breathes, digging furiously with the steel spoon to get the last bit of dross off the molten aluminum.

"Tink!"

"What, fucking Christ!"

Tink swings out the spoon, brushing past Malcom, who stands limply to one side, his face haggard, one cheek hanging like a bag of fat. Tink shakes the spoon. Molten aluminum splats past Malcom's feet, forcing him to jerk back out of range. Tink bubbles with laughter that is consumed by the greater noise. He empties the dross into a steel tray and turns back to stare at Malcom. See that one eye, smeared and watery, eternally staring at the moon: fish-eye, brine-lulled eye. Oh, if Tink had an ice-pick now. What he could do to repair that gaze.

"There's a truck coming to pick up those barb arms at ten." Malcom

shoves himself forward, limping to the left, dragging his left arm along like a recalcitrant pet. Tink squares off in front of him. Holds the glowing spoon at his waist. Malcom stops; looks down at the spoon, and up again at Tink's vaguely smiling face.

"They ain't crated yet. Some ain't even got the flash knocked off." Tink lowers the spoon, swings it so it almost touches Malcom's pantleg. "I don't even think we got enough of them."

"I don't give a shit about that. Truck's coming at ten. Get one of the guys to help you. Get Gene. But those barb arms go out. At ten. Ten sharp."

"Other pot ain't fluxed yet." Tink whirls, points the spoon at the pot by the Kux. Through the smoke and the dimness of the die-casting foundry, he can see the crew shuffling into the job: apparitions, denser wads of smoke in the ubiquitous haze.

"I don't care about that. Our cheques are on the floor there." Malcom jerks his head toward the mountain of tangled barb arms. "Get them out. By ten."

Old Fish-eye turns. Limpes off toward the die-making shop. Tink hurls the steel spoon on the concrete floor; Malcom swivels around to look at him, his face nearly blotted out now by the smoke. Tink hikes his trousers up over his gut. Where is the sweet breath drawn in youth? Where the fingers that once tripped across ivories? Gone up in acrid fumes. Or down to the devil. Tink and Malcom glare at one another for nearly half a minute. Finally Malcom turns. Is erased by the smoke. Tink is alone, briefly, in the inferno. Then Rambly emerges, waving his arms as though to clear a path through the thick haze. His long hair is tied in a pony tail, his mouth wrapped around a cigar.

"What the fuck you been doing? Burning bodies?"

Tink retrieves the steel spoon. Spits. Remembers the flying saucer he saw one day on the way to work. Why does the world look so much like the inside of an enormous gut? Why does Rambly look like an upright pillar of shit? "No, pistons. Pistons and transmission housings."

"Is that why it's so fucking smoky?" Rambly gestures with his cigar. "Why ain't my pot fluxed yet?"

"'Cause it ain't. I ain't had time."

Tink removes his baseball cap. Wipes the sweat from his forehead and pulls the cap back down around his ears. Santos has moved in behind the bulky HPM. One eye is squinted against the smoke from his cigarette. He removes the preheat and unscrews the valve to the nitrogen bottle.

Rambly takes a chaw of his cigar. "You're sure in a lousy mood. What did your old lady do—shut you off?"

"Never mind my old lady. I got a job for you. Knocking flash off barb arms."

"Fuck you. I get paid to die-cast."

"Your pot ain't ready yet. Won't be. You might as well knock flash."

"Get somebody else."

"Malcom said to get you. He wants those barb arms out by ten."

"Ten!" Rambly chews the word around the stub of the cigar. Sneers.

"Yeah, ten. Where's Gene?"

"Hasn't showed."

The HPM begins to drone. The machine opens wide its metal lips. Santos sprays lubricant on the barb arm die, the cores. Down toward the front of the factory the chu-bang-psst-clunk of the automatics can be heard. In the grinding room the jarring impact of the vibrator as it chews on hardware. Tink's head echoes the cacophony. Where is that Pacific atoll he was on earlier, the one with the naked babes and all the peace and quiet?

"Get Les then. We'll use Les." Tink shouts at Rambly, his voice barely crossing the distance of three feet.

"Get him yourself," Rambly yells back. "I ain't your go-for."

"Then start knocking flash."

"After I take my morning dump, geek."

Tink scurries to the grinding room. Aluminum dust pervades the air: a myriad glinting specks suspended in light falling through the open bay doors. Les is hefting a box of hat and coat hooks up on the sorting table. Tink shuts off the vibrator. Yells above the whine of the grinding wheel, where Enski is wearing down the burr on nut covers. "Bring some tea crates from out back. We gotta pack barb arms."

"No way. I gotta get these hooks ready for plating."

"Hooks can wait. Get the fucking tea crates. Truck's gonna be here at ten."

Les is a newcomer. Wears glasses, a beard. "What kind of fucking outfit is this anyway? First they want you to do one thing, then they want you to do another."

"I know. Get the crates."

Three minutes later: Les and Tink are diving into the mountain of barb arms like a couple of hungry ferrets. They fish out pieces and shove them into crates. Rambly is knocking off flash with the punch press. Whack-thunk, whack-thunk. He takes the cigar out of his mouth. Rubs the ash off on the bill of Tink's baseball cap.

"Come on, work, you animal, you wouldn't go to school."

Meanwhile, Commandant Tink is taking rut in his Rolls Royce. The woman's head is a grotesque mask crammed up against the back door. He is shoving his pole in and out the sappy embrace. Ooo-ah, rama-lama-ding-dong. His sweat splats like silver coins in the woman's eyes, which have this strained, angelic look. Tink thinks of heaven. He thinks of a green meadow decorated with dandelions. Ah, this is good. Splendid. Just what he needs to exorcise his demons. But then the phone rings. Tink tries to ignore it, but the damn thing won't go away.

"Sorry, honey, we'll have to finish this later on," he says, unsheathing himself.

Woman moans. Reaches for him. "Unfair, unfair."

"Such is life." He presses a button; a panel slides back, exposing the telephone. He grabs the receiver and shoves it up against his ear. "Tinkhauser here. What is it?"

"Trouble with the fence, sir."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Quicksand, sir."

"Quicksand?"

"That's what I said, sir. About sixty meters of it."

"Okay, be right there."

Tink looks at the damsel. That frolicking, hot bitch. That supine pastry. He sticks his fingers where they can do some good. She moans. Grabs his hand and tries to hold it there.

"Get back to you later on," he says; then, zipping up his fly, he pushes back the car door and steps out into a fecund jungle replete with ferns, palms and birds of paradise. One more step and he finds himself in the clearing where the fence is being erected. Barb arms sit atop every post, with barbed wire strung between them. Here men are pulling on a long rope, trying to free a truck mired up to its rear axle, however, the rope, made of some elastic material, stretches and shortens with each successive pull. Chains link the men at the ankles; their faces are as blank and emotionless as mannequins, their efforts as mechanical as those of a die-casting machine. Tink watches them for a while, then, turning on his heel, he enters the field tent where Malcom is standing at a long table in front of a topographical map.

"Okay, what seems to be the problem?"

Malcom grins a cadaverous grin. "Wouldn't it be more appropriate to ask me what isn't the problem?"

There, again, is that watery eye, the one that rotates independently of its companion. Tink smudges it with his thumb. He adds more and more pressure, until finally the eye in the other socket pops out and dangles by a long pulpy cord. Then he finds himself shaking Malcom's head. Squeezing and shaking as he grits his teeth. He puts the head under his arm and yanks it free of Malcom's body. He tears off down this neon-lit field, while the men in chains stare at him from beside the fence. He passes beneath a goal post and tosses Malcom's head skyward—this while an unseen crowd cheers from non-existent stands.

"How many we gotta have?"

Tink looks up from the tally sheet. "Twenty thousand. Half cp-1s and half cp-2s."

"How many we got now?"

"Nearly eight of each."

Tink checks the time: almost 9 o'clock. He looks at the crates stacked against the wall. One more tier and they'll be scraping the joists. This foul, fucking factory, he thinks. Always running out of space. He glances at the barb arms on the floor. Figures there are no more than seven hundred of each description. "We'll have to short-ship them," he tells Les. "Get back to work. I'll get Enski."

Tink shoves the pencil stub behind his ear. Hurries to the grinding room. Enski is still hard at work wearing down the burr on nut covers. Tink shuts off the machine: the noise dies away like that of a jet engine.

Enski glares at him, bug-eyed, his pockmarked face covered with aluminum dust. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

"I need you packing barb arms."

"Yeah, but these gotta go out too."

"This afternoon. Right now I need you packing barb arms."

Enski beats aluminum dust from his overalls. "Malcom ain't gonna like this."

"I don't care. Barb arms have to go out by ten. Ten sharp."

Commandant Tink gets back in his Rolls. He sticks his dong in the tart on the backseat and makes a quick job of coming. The tart fades from the picture. Tink sits up straight. He secures the knot of his tie and orders his chauffeur, Santos, to drive him to his office. They proceed down a long, paved driveway that weaves through the jungle. After a while the driveway becomes a thoroughfare that stretches along a sandy beach. Suddenly there is a hill. The Rolls glides up over the crest and down into a harbour on the other side. The terrain, here, could be in a war zone. The earth has been defoliated. Scorched. A cyclone fence obeys the contour of the hills. The fence is topped with barbed wire and there are guard towers every fifty feet.

Tink taps Santos on the shoulder. "Straight to my office, please."

"Yes, sir."

The Rolls pulls up at the gate, over which a sign arches like a rainbow: SECURITY ERECTIONS, A Division of the Tinkhauser Group, Limited Access. Here a guard stands ready with a sub-machine gun, someone who looks vaguely like Rambly. No, like Enski, with his face all pitted and full of blackheads. Tink and Enski trade salutes. The gate goes up and the Rolls drives on through. The defoliated earth gives off an odour that clings like tin to his throat. Down on the dock the factory is issuing plumes of inky smoke. Towering above the factory is an immensely large crane, now in the act of loading crates of barb arms into a freighter flying the Argentinean flag.

Santos brings the Rolls around to the factory and gets out to open the door for Tink. Tink climbs out; he rubs his fingers along the fender and turns them over to look at the dust. "This won't do," he says, eyeing Santos, whose face becomes that of a mask. "Wash it."

"Yes, sir. My apologies, sir."

Tink finds himself in his second-floor office. He is staring down through the window, watching Santos scrub the Rolls with a soapy brush. He entertains the fact that at any moment he can relieve Santos of his job and put him back in the die-casting factory. This makes him smile.

"About that shipment to Siberia, sir?"

"What about it?"

Tink turns to stare at Malcom. Jesus! if only he would get his goddamn eye repaired; it lolls in his head like a tadpole gone belly-up in a bloodshot sea. "Well, sir, it's gone astray."

"Astray! How can a million-plus barb arms go astray?!"

"Astray to Puerto Rico."

"Puerto Rico! What does Puerto Rico need with a million-plus barb arms?"

"That's just it, sir. They don't."

"Then get them shipped to the right place. Instantly."

"Yes, sir."

Tink growls: "And another thing: come here."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said, come here. Stand right in front of me, right here." Tink curls his index finger. "Closer. Toes up to mine. That's it. Now look off to your right."

Tink produces a hook. He gouges the wayward eye and yanks it out of Malcom's head. Malcom screams, clutches his bloody socket and screams again: — this while Tink pinches the eyeball off the hook and feeds it to a piranha in his fish tank.

"Hey, Tink this trim die ain't working right."

Tink looks at Rambly on the punch press. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's out of alignment."

"Then fix it. I ain't got time to do everything around here."

"No way, fuck-wad. It ain't in my contract." Rambly smiles around the cigar butt. "You do it. I'm going to the can for a smoke."

Tink hears the chu-bang-psst-clunk of the automatics and heads up front to check the zinc in the pots. Hat and coat hooks are scattered all over the floor. Malcom is sitting on an upturned, wooden box in the middle of the mess, his chin propped in the crook of his hands, watching the machine go through its cycle. Chu-bang-psst-clunk, chu-bang-psst-clunk. On seeing Tink, he lowers his arms. His left cheek jiggles like a bag of pudding. "Why hasn't Les cleaned up this mess?"

Tink hefts a couple ingots and slides them into the zinc pot. "'Cause he's packing barb arms."

"I thought I told you to get Gene."

"Gene didn't show."

"Why?"

"How should I know? I ain't Gene."

Malcom wobbles to his feet. Rotates his fish-eye. "I want this mess cleaned up. Right now."

"I'll get Enski to do it."

"No, I need him on nut covers."

"He ain't on them."

"What do you mean he ain't on them?" Malcom wags his jowls. Swings his left arm in a gesture of annoyance.

"Just that. He's helping me. Otherwise those barb arms ain't gonna be ready on time."

Malcom shakes his head. "Put him back on nut covers. I need those nut covers."

"I know, like everything else."

"I beg your pardon?"

Malcom's eye twirls in its socket; it spins, it vibrates, it performs blind tricks. Exactly at that moment the secretary comes prancing around the corner, dressed in a yellow jump-suit, an order form clutched in her hand. "Ultimate Metal's on the phone. What should I tell them?"

Malcom jerks around. Rages. "Why isn't Steve taking care of these things, goddamn it!"

"Steve's away on vacation, sir."

"Vacations! Goddamn vacations! Tell them we're working on their order right now."

"That's what I told them. But they said that wasn't good enough. They have to have their product today." The secretary runs the butt end of her pen through her blonde hair, her fingernails flashing red, her lips parted in a smile.

"Okay, I'll talk to them." Malcom turns back to Tink. Contrives a snarl. "I want this mess cleaned up by the time I get back. Is that clear?"

"I'll do what I can."

"No, you'll get it cleaned up. Right now."

Malcom steps over the hat and coat hooks. Swivels. Skewers Tink with his gaze. "And get Enski back on those nut covers. Hydro's yelling for them."

9:20. Tink lands a glob of spit in the zinc pot: a sizzle and some smoke. He rams a shovel into the pile of hat and coat hooks and hurls them into wooden boxes. He throws one box on top of another. Grabs an empty box. Catches his hand on the metal corner. "Cocksucker," he fumes, ripping off his glove. A cut arches across the flesh where he's missing his middle three fingers. A thin ribbon of blood appears in the crevice. He yanks out his handkerchief, wraps it around his hand, and shoves his hand back into the glove. "Fuck it," he snarls, kicking hat and coat hooks out of his way, heading back to the feeder pot to feed it more transmission housings.

Commandant Tink sits down to play at the piano. His fingers march across the ivories. Oh, what sublime soaring! What virtuosity! He plays like Liberace, like Duke Ellington, like Chopin, like the big B. himself. His fingers are endowed with magic. Music pours from the piano in the form of blue flames. Then in the periphery of his vision he notices this monk clad in a black, hooded robe. He turns to look more closely. Malcom grins at him from inside the hood. Tink attempts to rear up from the bench, but it is too late. Malcom has slammed the keyboard cover down on Tink's right hand. Tink looks down at his trapped fingers. Instead of finding them caught in a piano he finds them caught in a cropping die on the punch press. He stumbles backwards. Falls on a heap of barb arms. He sees his fingers lying among metal scraps in the box below the punch press and retrieves them with his good left hand, just in time to faint. When he comes to he finds himself lying in a hospital bed. Malcom is standing in front of a window, just having told him he was sorry about his fingers. "In the panic I guess I forgot I had put them in the bathroom sink."

Tink feels like crying. His groin feels like dropping down around his

ankles. "Oh well," he tells Malcom. "I wasn't all that good at playing the piano anyway."

Les shakes Tink by the shoulder. Peers at him through his round, metal glasses. "Hey, man, what the fuck's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me."

"Then why you taking it out on the goddamn press?"

Tink looks at the brass maul in his hand, realizing he's been slamming it against the punch press. "Fucking machine," he says. "Always breaking down . . ."

He throws the brass maul on the floor and grabs the large transfer ladle. He dips the ladle into the molten aluminum of the feeder pot and carries it over to the pot by the HPM. Santos takes a shot. Liquid metal sprays the air, falling in flakes all around Tink. Santos shakes his head. "Watch yourself, old man. Next time I might not miss."

Tink shoves some gates into the pot to cool it off and races back for another ladle of molten metal. Meanwhile Commandant Tink is down on his knees, peeking through a keyhole into a room where a woman is undressing. This woman isn't what you'd call a beauty. She's about forty-five, she's tremendously overweight, and she has stretchmarks all over her belly. Tink takes a breath, sighs; then someone taps him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir. I hate to bother you at a time like this, but you're wanted on the phone."

"Who is it?"

"The man wouldn't give his name, sir."

Tink stumbles to his feet and heads out of the room. He walks down a long corridor to an alcove where an altar is set up. The phone sits on a table below the feet of a sculptured Christ. He picks up the receiver and crushes it to his ear. "Yes, who is it?"

"Is this Mr. Tinkhauser? Mr. Axel Tinkhauser?"

"That's right. Who am I speaking to?"

"You don't know me, Mr. Tinkhauser, so it wouldn't do any good to give you my name."

"Then perhaps you could state your business?"

"Certainly. I have an order with you for a million-plus barb arms. I'm in urgent need of them and I have yet to see a single one."

"Well, how can I possibly help you if you don't give me your name?"

Here there's an abrupt click and the line goes dead. Tink rattles the phone. Nothing. He looks up at the Christ figure: one eye stares at the moon, tears of blood trickle down a cheek that sags.

"Fools," he says. "Fools."

9:35. Tink turns around from breaking off gates and finds himself face to face with Malcom and his fish-eye. "I thought I told you to put Enski back on the nut covers."

Tink hurls a gate toward the feeder pot. It whangs off the slag barrel, walks ten feet on its double pair of prongs and bangs up against the forge. Malcom follows the progress of the wayward gate. Looks at Tink.

"Well . . ."

"That's what you told me to do, but right now I need him packing barb arms. Otherwise we ain't gonna get done in time to ship that order out to Calgary Supply."

"You mean it isn't ready yet?"

"That's right. I told you this morning we were running behind."

"Jesus Christ, Tink! What are you trying to do—ruin me?" Malcom shakes his jowls; the loose flesh buckles and heaves. Tink jumps out of the way just as Santos takes a shot on the HPM. Hot metal flies through the air, catching Malcom down one side of his face and body. Malcom brushes at himself like a crazy man, tearing away bits of skin with the hot metal flakes. Tink grabs a hose and sprays cold water on him. Malcom gyrates his arms more wildly. "Jesus Christ, cut that out. Cut that out. I'm not a goddamn fish."

Commandant Tink orders Santos to stop the Rolls. Santos glances at him in the rearview mirror. "Right here, in the middle of nowhere?"

"That's right. Just pull over to the side. Along that straightaway."

The Rolls brakes to a stop. Tink steps out onto the gravel shoulder and heads off across a meadow strewn with dandelions. It is nearing dusk, and long shadows reach out to meet him as he enters the jungle. He walks for what seems hours; his clothes tear, and soon he has lost his shoes. Then in this clearing, there's a space ship. Lights stream red. The engine gives off a dull roar. Tink climbs a ladder up to the bridge. Controls are arrayed in a long, swiping curve, with myriad green lights winking on and off. He sits down in this large, swivel chair obviously meant for the captain. The space ship takes off. The weight of acceleration presses down on him. Breathing becomes hard, laborious. The observation screen shows the green meadow with the dandelions tumbling past at incredible speed. He feels as though he personally is about to veer off into a crash. He closes his eyes. When he reopens them he finds the space ship has landed and that he is now descending a ladder down a long metal tube. The climb down is interminable. Also, dark. He feels for the rungs with his hands and feet. At last he sees some light far below him. He draws a breath. Sighs. The expiration seems enormous. He continues his descent. At the bottom of the ladder he must hang by one hand and drop to the ground. Oddly enough, he finds himself on a street near his home. There is Pete's Corner Groceria. He enters it. Stands in front of the newstand flipping through a *Playboy*. Occasionally the proprietor appears from behind a shelf full of cereal boxes to peer at him. On the way to the counter Tink picks up a Big Snack candy bar. The Chinese man has a funny, distant look in his eye as he rings up the amount on the cash register.

"Do you want a bag for that?"

"Naw," Tink replies. "I only live around the corner."

He leaves with the *Playboy* and the candy bar. Finds himself in the alley. He walks down the lane to his garage. Inside the garage is fixed up like a house: an upright woodstove, an armchair, a window looking out through lilac bushes and, on his workbench, the model of a space ship. Tink sits in the armchair, with his trousers down around his ankles, flip-

ping through the *Playboy* as he eats his Big Snack bar. His prick is standing up like a maypole. He is beginning to feel warm. The warmth gives him a feeling of peace, of wholeness. He pulls on his dong; then, suddenly, the door slams back. Framed in the opening is this really fat woman. Though she remains a shadow because of the light in back of her, he knows instinctively it is his wife. He drops the Big Snack bar in the fold-out of the *Playboy*, and lowers the magazine onto his lap, noticing that he is now seated in a wheelchair.

"What is it, Tink?"

Malcom is sitting in the swivel chair at his desk, his head tilted back. The secretary is dabbing white ointment on the burn spots on his face. The fat-bag that is his left cheek has sagged down around his neck, making him look as though he has a goiter.

"I want to talk to you," Tink says.

"Well, then, talk. But make it brief. I haven't got all day."

Tink tosses his gloves down on the desk. "I quit. Is that brief enough?"

Malcom flails his arms, driving away the secretary from his face. He jerks himself up. His jowls swish around. His eye floats freely in its socket: a bob on a maddened sea.

"Quit! You can't quit!"

"What do you mean I can't quit? I just did."

Malcom shakes his head. Laughs. "Don't be ridiculous, Tink. You have five kids. You're nearly fifty years old and you're missing most of your fingers. Who—who is going to hire somebody like you?"

"Don't worry. I'll find a job."

Malcom laughs. His face slops around like jello.

"What—driving taxi?"

"If I have to, sure."

"Don't be stupid. Even a taxi outfit wouldn't look at you." Malcom picks up Tink's gloves and shoves them at him. "Get back out in the foundry. We'll forget this even happened."

Tink lowers his head. Brings it back up.

"Then how about a raise? I deserve a raise."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I'm here almost twelve hours a day, and because everybody is earning more than I am."

"So what, you're getting compensation."

"Still, I'm earning less."

Malcom shakes Tink's gloves at him. "Sorry, I can't afford it right now. You know that as well as I do."

Commandant Tink lands his space ship on the dock outside the factory. Everything is still: the violet sunset is frozen on the sea, not a sound emanates from the open bay doors of the factory, nothing moves except a rat that scurries in behind a crate of barb arms. The hills loom as dark as silhouettes beyond the factory, all except for one peak which is sending a bright lava flow down its side. He enters the dim realm of the foundry. The pots glow a luminous orange. They pulse, they suck rhyth-

mically at the air. He glances to his left and right. The machinery is silent, a smoky haze floats among the rafters.

"Is anybody here?"

He walks down the aisle between the punch presses and the packing crates. The fluorescent light shimmers. He passes through the die-making shop. The lathe, the milling machine, the drill press and the band saw are all at work: cutting, drilling, planing and reaming away at slabs of metal. He flips on the light in the bathroom and closes the door. He looks at his face in the mirror: the grizzled beard, the sunken eyes; then he looks down at the stainless steel sink where three fingers lie in a row, issuing rivulets of blood that flow down the drain.

"Millar and Brown," the truck driver says.

Tink leans the ladle against a crate of barb arms. Waves his arm at the crates stacked against the wall. "That's them. I hope you got enough room."

The bathroom door bangs back. Tink is sitting on the toilet, his bloody right hand with the missing fingers wrapped around his cock. The men grab him and carry him like a long pig on their shoulders. They march him out of the foundry and up the side of the peak that has turned into a volcano. He hears the jangle of the chains that link their ankles. Higher and higher they climb into the choking fumes. He looks down. Finds himself staring into the molten eye of the volcano. Feels the heat against his face. Begins to twist and squirm.

What has become of his Pacific atoll? Where have the sandy beaches and the velvet sunsets gone?

Malcom bellows: "Come on, fellas. Let's get a move on it. We haven't got all day."

Tink is high atop the crates. He looks down at Malcom: that fish-eye. He puts his foot against a crate and shoves. The crate hits the floor just short of Malcom's feet, splitting open and disgorging all of its barb arms. Malcom jerks his head up at Tink. Wags his face.

"You just tried to kill me, Tink. You just tried to kill me."

Tink scrambles across the top row of crates. He makes like King Kong as he grabs the rafter. Below him, the molten eye of the feeder pot glows like an orange harvest moon.

"Tink, come down from there. Right now."

Tink shakes his head. He makes as if to jerk himself off. "Fuck you," he yells, then he pulls himself up through the rafters, up toward the skylight that sucks the smoky fumes out of the foundry, up to the roof-top and the light, where, kneeling, he awaits the space ship that will take him gloriously away.

This, while sunshine falls like perfect notes on the sticky tar all around him.

Brenda Riches

ENDURING

It always begins between the halves of a cup. The porcelain has little to do with it; it's the cracking that matters.

Before the accident the cup created no stir. It hung on a hook; held tea; lay in suds. When it fell and broke in two clean parts, anxiety seeped between.

Now you will never be sure, though the cup was mended, if it will safely hold again. Now you lift anxiously. You sip anxiously. You cannot believe the tea will stay long enough for you to drink it.

THIRST

With his toe the boy draws a face in the sand. The face has a deep mouth and two deep eyes. That'll do for now, the boy thinks, and walks off to play on the rocks. A wasp hovers over the face, then settles in one of the eyes. When the boy comes back, his knee bleeding brightly from the cut of a sharp rock, the wasp is still in the eye. The boy takes a stone and squashes the wasp right there. He likes the striped dead eye of the face he made. Now for the other one, he thinks, and goes away to look for a small white shell. It takes him so long to find one exactly right that when he returns and puts it in the other eye place the tide is creeping close. He must fill the mouth, the boy thinks, before the sea takes the face away.

JOURNEY

I, TOO, have followed the spoor
From the jungle to the clearing
And drunk, have read
The entrails of the winds:
But can a crooked mind
Measure a crooked world?

Who ever sowed the grain of our Earth
Lies silenced in the prison house of our desires.
There is always the nut of another metaphor
Awaiting the crack of a wiser mouth;

Perhaps, to understand
Is to cease to measure
And to measure with the heart.

INTROIT

AND THE SEA cackled, foaming at the mouth
Till dry cracks ploughed the waves back;
Hope, said the sea, is not a method
There are too many sad stories
Carved in indifferent stones:

There is always another story
After this is told
And words after the words
Of this world;
Did our elders not say
The boats leave but the people stay?

Behind the dawn stand
Queues of days, nibbles at debts
The lonely poor dropping from sight

Behind the dawn, nothing
Save the bones of sad stories:
History does not repeat itself
It merely quotes us
When we have not been too wise

HINTERLAND

to you, it is no mystery,
a creature-crazy asylum
where wood-wild lumberjacks fly
off at the axe-handle,
scour black bush thick with things –
opaque, untamed shapes,
and find themselves themselves;
where mosquito-words
draw blood, not pictures,
terrifying the dying daylights
out of you.

your city is where you think
real things happen:
new streetlamps coming into existence
to expunge human shadows;
artists forging their names
from street signs and obscurity;
nuns saving none from brick and buick loneliness.
it is the home of the national
natural culture:
fire-escape-sculpture,
neon narratives, monomaniac moan music,
zero gravity-grope dance.

for you do not believe true
these sea chanty towns
where totem light-poles spire fire to God,
amerindians brandish tomahawk-tints
in the paintbrush country,
and western-eastern cowboys
emerge from the dark undergrowth
of guitars, and twang godawful gospels

in tangle-taverns and bramble-bars,
millions of miles
from your city circle, its concentric,
constraining, strangling rings
of mobsters and millionaires.

but you do not recognize
aboriginal art:
milk maids who are magicians;
fishermen who are magicians, who
snatch shimmering salt cod
out of silver, slippery air;
coal miners who are method actors,
portraying the pride of maritime Blacks.

hinterland is that country
unimaginable
by you.

J. M. W. TURNER IN NOVA SCOTIA

miraculous how light raptures,
roots, in water,
transmutes to holy morning colours —
chlorophyll, cobalt, and copper,
a wash of greens, a spray of petals,
upon pale china canvas;
or, if caught in brooks,
flashes into fish.

succulent tastes the sun
transubstantiated in apples;
delicate is the dawn baptized
in a maiden's water-glass eyes!

yet, all blanches or blackens,
withers, rots, with revelation;
soon will rise a darkling moon —
so white, it deceives many,
so white, it escapes vision;
not light but light's reflection.

THE PICTURE

At first a mound
a breast topped by a familiar
black nipple
edging itself with a vague sky
circled by little hills
milking itself no milk
but blood
always blood
Beyond, a far suggestion of a mountain
before a line of rims and bougainvillaea
red in blooming time
It could be spring, but ours
is anytime of Year
rain or shine, anytime
when fate itself abounds
with nipple
reaches up heavenwards
looking for suckling mouths
and yellow moths.
Ours is anytime,
anytime of Year.
So I promised a festival
that never came.
I shall redeem our ancient pledge.
I promise. I promise.

The land wreathes in rhythm
with your soul, caressed by history
and cruel geography,
landscape ineffable yet screaming
eloquent resonant like the drums
of after harvests.

We pile rocks on terracing love
Carry the pithy cloth
to cover the hearths of our mother.

Come now, you lucky ones
come to the festival of corn and lamb
to the finest feast of this land
come, now,
your lovers have unfurled
their cloths
their thighs glistening like golden knives
ready for the plunging,
for the plentiful loving time.

Joseph Bruchac

YIYI THE SPIDER AND THE STONE WITH EYES

An Anlo Story

Misa gli loo—hear a story.

Gli neva—let the story come.

This story came from far away and fell upon Yiyi the Spider. There was a great famine. All of the animals went about searching for food. Yiyi, the Spider was wandering around, too, when he came to a stone with two eyes.

This is strange, Spider thought, and he almost said out loud, *how can there be a stone with eyes?* But he was tired, too tired to even talk. He was so tired that he went and collapsed, so! under a baobab tree near the stone.

Soon two antelope came by. When they reached the stone they stopped. One of the antelope said, "Oooo, is that not a stone?" The second antelope said, "Tsooo, with eyes, too!" And both of them said in surprise, "A stone with eyes!" And immediately both antelope fell down dead.

Yiyi the Spider had been watching all of this. He stood up from under the tree and carried the dead antelope home. Then he came back, picked up the stone with eyes, took it to a busy crossroads and waited. Whenever any animal came by, Yiyi would run up to them and ask, in a very innocent way, "What is that by the roadside?" "Tsooo, a stone with eyes!" the animal would say and drop dead at Spider's feet. Then Yiyi would drag the animal home and his wife would cook it for himself and his children. So the Spider family became well fed and healthy while all the other animals were hungry and thin.

One day, though, Kadzidaw the Squirrel was hiding in the tree near the crossroads. He saw everything Yiyi did. He came down from the tree, and Spider saw him. Immediately Yiyi the Spider ran up to him with his old question: "What is that over there?"

"What is that?" Kadzidaw the Squirrel said.

"I say, what is *that*?" Yiyi said again.

"I say, what is *that*?" Squirrel repeated.

Spider said, "Isn't that a stone?"

Squirrel said, "Isn't that a stone?"

"What stone?" said Yiyi.

"What stone?" said Kadzidaw.

Spider said, "A stone with . . ."

Squirrel said, "A stone with . . ."

"Go on," said Spider.

"Go on," said Squirrel.

Then Yiyi the Spider lost his temper. "Squirrel," he said, "how stupid you are! How very, very stupid you are! Why can't you say a simple thing such as: a stone with eyes."

That was the last thing Spider ever said, for he too, fell down dead.

And so, as my old Auntie always said, eventually you'll be done as you did.

Christopher Levenson

VISITING

It is a pain
I love,
having them over
each week, underscoring
separation, this subtle
haemorrhage, the draining
loss of daily contact, those
minor boredoms, labours
of love.

It is a pain
having it out every time,
the jagged abcessed truth
of envy and longing,
the awareness of parenthood
diminishing
as each fights to be free
of the-all-too familiar
complicity.

It is relief,
this nagging
emptiness
once they are gone.
I am a masochist,
I love my hurt,
fondle my scars:
my four children.

Yambo Ouologuem

TO MY HUSBAND

You were called Bimbircokak
And all was well like that
But you became Victor-Emile-Louis-Henri-Joseph
And bought a set of tableware

I was your wife
You called me your majestic half
We were eating together
You hoisted us around a table

Calabash and ladle
Gourd and couscous
Vanished from the oral menu
Dictated to me by your fatherly command

We are modern you pointed out
While drinking praise out of my clear and confiding air

Hot hot is the sun
At the request of the tropics
But your tie does not part
From a neck threatened with strangulation

And since you pout when I speak Negritude
Well let us speak western servitudes, but I beg you
Look at me
How did you find me
We eat grapes pasturized milk gingerbread

From importation
And eat little
A being a privative as the learned say

It is not surprising if
A-frica
Denotes that she is deprived

You were called Bimbircokak
And all was well like that
You wished to be Victor-Emile-Louis-Henri-Joseph
Which
As far as I remember
Does not call to mind your kinship with
Rockefeller
(Old cheese brand produced by Roquefort and
Other Fetiches)
But you see Bimbircokak
Through your own fault by being fanatical about fork and spoon
From underdeveloped I became undernourished

Dionne Brand/*from CHRONICLES OF
THE HOSTILE SUN*

I am not that strong woman on the mountain
At Castle Bruce
the mountain squarely below her feet
the flesh bursting under her skin
I cannot hold a mountain under my feet,
she dug yams and birthed a cow
I am not the old one
boxes on her head in Roseau
the metred street, she made one hundred turns in it
the pee streaming from her straddled legs
she stood over the gutter,
the hot yellow stream wet her ankles
and the street,
nor the other one on church street
skirt tied around her waist
mad
some aged song shared her lips
for many years with a clay pipe,
I am the one with no place to live
I want no husband
I want nothing inside of me
that hates me
poems are walls and niches
park benches and iron spikes
I want nothing that enters me
screaming
claiming to be history
my skin hangs out on a clothes line
drying and eaten by the harsh sun
and the wind threatens to blow my belly
into a balloon
to hold more confusions

alone is my only rescue
along is the only thing I chose
I'll gather my skin like a washerwoman
her hand insisting the wind out,
I will bare my teeth to the sun
let it feel
how it is to be dazzled

MARRIAGE

When mi sidown
Pon mi bombo claat
ina calico dress
under the gwango tree
a suck coarse salt
fi the night fi dun
wen twist face joan
and mi man mus come
down those concrete steps
from her tatch-roof house
han in han an' smile
pon them face

An a bus'im 'ead
wid a cistern brick
blood full mi yeye
a tear 'er shut
rip 'im pride
the little heng pon nail

The two rocky miles 'ome
we drop some fists
Blood soaked licks
Kasha sticks

But lateron
a sooth 'im pain
bathe the blood down
the cistern drain
ten common-law-years
ina wi tenament yard

An sure as 'ell
wi anger rest

'im eyes regret
plea 'an confess
then glide mi

to gramma dead-lef bed
an' marry mi
under the chinnelle spread
again an' again
'till day does done
evening come

BELLY WOMAN'S LAMENT

A likkle seed
Of her love fi a man
Germinates in her gut
She dah breed
Cool breeze
It did nice
im Nuh waan no wife
Just life
Wey Fi do!

The likkle seed
jus a grow
bloat her belly
It noh know
How it change
Mek life rearrange

Ooman bruk
Nuh likke wuk
Man gawn
Nuh waan noh ties
just life
Wey Fi doh!

Anada heart
Start fi beat
Anada mouth
de fi feed
Plant corn
Reap weed

Wey fi doh!

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE
(on my obsessions)

I wait for the outcome of many things
which took off before my eyes:
an angel launched into space from my heart,
the conception of a new Nigerian—
I'm working myself up for a vision of a redeemer.
Anything is possible, either I see them
or end up singing into the night that will surely
swallow us in its infinite cave.
In our time patience makes more demands;
hope visits us with a conjurer's tongue.
Meanwhile, I continue to wait, which is what I do
when I work or play; I have to wait
for the angel to soft-land in my heart,
wait for the redeemer to emerge from the wilderness—
either or both may come true, soon;
do not tell me things had been cosier
than the misery cushioned in refinement,
nor tell me things are harsher now
than joy kept to die in a closed institution.
I'm waiting for the return of the cosmonaut,
I look forward to the rebirth of the Bull;
someone has to lift the cross of misery from here—
it is possible for everybody to be happy.
Anything is possible, hence I work myself up
waiting as I must in these demanding times
to witness the exultation of the double arrival
in my heart, my land . . .

THE BITTER SMILE

She smiles with bone in her throat
she bleeds unattended to in her own clinic
—who knows who's on call today?
she collapses from the weight of her pain.

There are loud calls, there are frantic prayers
people scan the roads for the medicine-man,
the same roads that have been crashing their hopes;
they look back to a golden age buried in time,
they look forward to a millennium for survivors,
they look sideways and see their own shadows.
No one knows from here what plant will grow to fruition,
no one knows from here what is a mirage in the distance.

The bitch has eaten flesh to an impossible bone
and saliva begins to drip from her mouth;
Nigeria barks blood, she bites none;
the loot turns to daggers in the robber's soul;
ruin visits whoever swallows mountainfuls of forbidden food
to prove the mad power of prosperity.

New guides are being recruited in half-light
to conduct people above their petty selves.
There is a big tree standing in the heart
there are big stars above it
a thunderous storm will chase out the drought
and fill our gourds with water.

People look towards the arrival
there are many stars in the horizon
in every heart grows the curative herb
the maiden smiles in the throes of her labour
she smiles in the shadow of another age
the shadow drenched by regenerating hormones.

Bernard Dadié

The Mirror of Famine

It was a mirror in which one could never gaze at oneself, or hey presto! all the good things flew away, disappeared, vanished into thin air. To give it a try, one had to be like Spider, brave, daring, intrepid like Spider; curious but foolish like Spider. So once again it was Spider, Kacou Ananzè, who chanced his fate. And he did so after experiencing the dizziness, gloomy thoughts and funeral procession of nightmares that always come after hunger. He did so when his belly, full to bursting and resounding like a well warmed-up tomtom, had allowed him to taste the eternal chorus of life, contemplate the sullen pink of a sun tired of always running after an unattainable moon, and be overcome with pleasure because the evening breeze was tickling the soles of his feet. That evening, the breeze tickled his feet so much that. . . , it slipped into his neck and ears so much that. . . , it became so seductive and enchanting that he said to himself: "Why not gaze at myself in the mirror?"

Ah! I can hear you exclaiming: "One has to be a real idiot to get to that point!" I beg your pardon! And what about us, we who are always analyzing our happiness, dismantling our toys to perceive their mechanisms, are we not in the same boat when it comes to curiosity? And you should know and understand once and for all that one is not an idiot when named Kacou Ananzè. If he allows himself some daring gestures, it is because he always has more than one trick in his head and ready answers at his lips to get himself out of difficulties. No, Kacou Ananzè is not trapped so easily! To catch him, ten, twenty, one hundred of the elders would join forces. . . but he always emerged victorious from the most skilfully prepared traps. For when they thought they held his arm, they only had a leg, and when they were sure they held his trunk in their hands, he was only a tree trunk.

This Kacou Ananzè enjoys difficult situations, obstacles that develop his faculties, magnify his intelligence, and stimulate his ingenuity!

There was famine in the village. For three successive years the rains had failed to come. Not a single black cloud wandered in the sky. Did the starved clouds die on their journey? The sun, in a rage, roasted everything, and the wind, to woo the sun, kept sweeping sand around. The grass grew no more. Every day the parched soil split and cracked

apart a little more. Not satisfied with setting fire to forests, the sun burned down huts. The stripped trees were a pitiful sight. They looked like a woman whose hair had been shaved off and whose jewels had been taken away. The boughs, branches and twigs could have been mistaken for roots and tubers trying to draw from the overheated air the sap that they no longer found in a waterless soil. The distress was general. One could not single out anyone to blame, since everyone this time was suffering from the famine. At first people tried to pick a quarrel with Monkey, because he pretended to be king of kings. And to justify his claim, he would tell everyone: "Kings sit on a seat made of a tree trunk, which I climb on to relieve myself. Who then is the king?"

Man, in order to get even with Monkey, who talked of him without naming him, would tell everyone:

"Monkey, Monkey is the one who brings about all these calamities. By always climbing trees to relieve himself, look at what he has brought upon us."

But what was the use of trying to pick a quarrel with Monkey at such a time, when this Monkey, hopping on branches, pretended to beseech God! Man, therefore, did not arouse much interest. And once more, the animals poked fun at him.

The famine was becoming more dreadful every day. In spite of all their complicated ceremonies, fetishists had not succeeded in drawing the slightest cloud over the country. Not even a ghost of a mist. Starvation was giving a hand to death. It was giving both hands, so many people were dying all the time.

Not escaping the common fate, Kacou Ananzè also suffered the torments of hunger: stomach cramps, dizziness, pains in the joints, buzzing noises in the ears, vision problems and general weakness. He wondered every night whether he would be able to get up the next morning.

To survive, he became a fisherman. He was fishing all the time. Ananzè became master of the art of fishing. He would cast his line and bring back a few shellfish. But, as if it wanted to play, one of the thousand inhabitants of the water would nibble at the hook and drag the float towards the bottom to let it bob back to the surface, at the very moment our fisherman was getting ready to pull, in order to reel in the prey. Ah! the bandits, the bandits that refused to be hooked. But he did not get angry. What would have been the use? He had become patient. The time, besides, called for patience.

Kacou Ananzè was fishing. Often, he spent the night on the warm shore, free from mosquitoes. The water, withdrawing in its bed a little more every day, left white sand everywhere, which, under the moonlight, seemed like an immense shroud. The water shrank in its bed to fight against the drought, against the sun which heated everything. The time of cascades, swirls, whirlpools, waterfalls crowned with foam was certainly over. The water pushed away from its banks, leaving the trees,

luxuriant not long ago, leaning over the shimmering waves to contemplate at their leisure their creeper necklaces, their curly hair, their jewels of fruits. The reeds and mangroves we will not even mention. They had all disappeared: dead, burned to ashes. Divorced from the forest, the waters flowed sadly, without a song, without the slightest whisper, that whisper just like the one heard at the feet of the trees when the water was still the friend of the forest.

The waters of the lagoons and rivers, all those white, black, blue waters which carried duck-weeds and water lilies, clumps of reeds turning around, clinging on here for a moment as if to share some news, leaving suddenly as if in a hurry to finish their journey, all these waters with their flotillas and twigs picked up here and there, these waters, in order to survive, were fighting painfully against the thirsty, white-hot sun. They slumbered, scarcely flowing. They were a sight to see, these waters, with their levels decreasing every day! Were they hungry too?

Kacou Ananzè was fishing. He was fishing relentlessly on the banks of dribbles of water. The great rivers which scared men by their vastness and their depth, the rivers with tumultuous currents, eating men and domestic animals, all these rivers, by falling back and shrinking up to endure, had become dribbles, puddles. Sometimes a swallow, lost in this torrid country, would drink from that water. Burned to its entrails, it would fly off with cries of despair, soar up towards the sky as if to say to God: "The living are dying, the living are dying! They must be saved!"

The earth was indeed being emptied of people. The living were walking with flat bellies, so flat that one wondered whether they still contained guts.

Kacou Ananzè was fishing. For a week the float had not moved. It was not even blinking, as we say at home, to tell Ananzè: "Look! Take care! There is prey at the end of your line." The float was mute.

"Ah, I know! I was not sitting at my usual place."

He sat at his usual place. The float still did not move.

"Well! I was not in this position. But how was I seated? My feet were apart like this, my head to the right and the bag to the left."

He took up this very position, but the float still did not move.

"How stupid I am! My fishing line, I did not hold it this way! Here . . . that is how I held it when I caught shellfish."

He held his line that way. And the float still did not move.

"What curse has been put on me? Will I too die of starvation? I, Kacou Ananzè? Die of hunger? Never! Has Death really looked at me? Has hunger really weighed me?"

And he cast his line again. And the float still did not move. Now Kacou Ananzè was having dizzy spells, seeing and hearing things. He chattered to himself and then demanded silence, as if other people had been chattering . . .

"What? What is going on? I ask you. Is it true? The float! the float!"

Look at it! It is moving! It is diving! Do you see it?"

Kacou Ananzè, staring wide-eyed, was looking at the float, the float which was moving and making little waves around itself.

"Should I pull? How should I pull to bring in a few shellfish?"

The float disappeared in the water. Our fisherman gets up, puts one leg here, the other there, like this, holds his breath, closes his eyes, leans forward and "aha!" reels in his line, at the end of which dangles a Catfish, as big as a new-born baby's little finger. He rushes at it, takes it with both hands, and dances, this Kacou Ananzè. But then the little Catfish, as big as a new-born baby's little finger, whispers to him, trembling all over:

"Spare me, papa Ananzè."

"What are you saying?"

"Leave me in the water and you will be happy."

"I have heard it all before. I often use the same ruse on the people who become my dupes."

"Believe me, you will be happy."

"Enough nonsense. I will only be happy when I feel you in my stomach."

"Listen to me."

"Go on."

"You must climb the kapok tree over there, to the twelfth branch."

"The most flexible one?"

"Yes, that one. Let yourself fall from there and you shall have everything you desire."

"You are not at all stupid, little Catfish, as big as a new-born baby's little finger. My word! You say that to me, the master of trickery? Where Death failed, you want to succeed? Never! Climb the kapok tree, let myself fall, break my neck on the advice of a little lad like you! But in this business, what do you do about the prerogative of age, the role of intelligence, and the privilege of experience?"

"Believe me."

The voice was so beseeching, the tone so frank that Kacou Ananzè took a chance. In two leaps he was at the foot of the kapok tree, and climbed up. It seemed as if thousands of arms were pushing him, enticing him up to the twelfth branch. And the trunk, in spite of the enormous thorns, seemed smooth and soft to him. The little Catfish, on the bank white with light, was waving to him. And it was not small any more but big, very big.

Ananzè closes his eyes and "whoosh," jumps, but making sure not to fall head first. A broken neck is death; a fractured limb is still life. He had scarcely left the twelfth branch, looking like a gondola swaying in a current, when he suddenly found himself in the most wealthy and marvellous city in the world, the busiest centre of the globe. Men were going, coming, buying, exchanging, negotiating, dealing in secondhand

goods, speculating, transporting, evacuating, delivering, without the bitterness of debates or discourteous discussions—a primary rule in this fairy country. And everywhere there were palaces and lights of all colours that gave to this city, night and day, a truly magical appearance. Before his very eyes, there was nothing but changing scenery. As for abundance, it is useless to speak of it. By the jovial, glowing looks of the inhabitants, one knew in what an eldorado one was. Every one of them was health personified. A prodigious city, as much by its size and activity as by its density of population. Kacou Ananzè, astonished, murmured:

“He did not deceive me, the little Catfish!”

He had fallen in a field where everything was growing. And he ate and ate. And he fattened himself up. He had cheeks like this! with folds and rolls of fat everywhere. He had, in this abundance, lost the notion of time.

One day, surprised in his retreat, he was taken to the Queen of this prodigious city. Kacou Ananzè behaved so well that he became the Prime Minister of the kingdom.

The Queen, however, had told him: “You can do anything in my kingdom and do anything in my palaces, but what you must never do is to look at yourself in the mirror over there.”

“Very well,” replied Kacou Ananzè.

As of that day, his misfortune began: “Why not gaze at myself in this mirror, since everything is given to me? . . . This mirror must be a magical one. Ah! this Queen is trying to outsmart me. What sort of behaviour is that?”

And the mirror was there, looking like any other mirror.

“Well, if it looks so ordinary, it is because its power is so great.”

The evening breeze kept on tickling the soles of his feet and slipping into his neck and ears. It was caressing the hairs in his nose and his eyebrows. It tickled the soles of his feet so much, that . . . it slipped into his neck and ears so much, that . . . Kacou Ananzè said to himself: “Why not gaze at myself in the mirror?”

And he did. But he immediately found himself back on the bank of the river with burning shores, his fishing line in his hand, the float motionless.

And he was hungry! hungry! He cast his line again and again. The float dives down. Ananzè reels in the line. On the hook hangs a little Catfish, as big as a new-born baby’s little finger. Our fisherman, very happy, delicately unhooks it. The Catfish says nothing.

“Well well! Here is my friend the Catfish; how are you?”

“ . . . ”

“Don’t you recognize me? Ah! yes, that’s it . . . you like to do good secretly . . . I’m going to show you how grateful I am anyway.”

“ . . . ”

"But it is me, Spider, Kacou Ananzè . . . Spider from the other day! Don't you remember our last meeting? It was a morning like this one . . . I had taken you from the river and you were saying . . . What were you saying? Ah! . . . yes . . . 'Spare me . . . Believe me . . . You will be happy . . . Listen, you will have happiness . . .'"

" . . . "

"Must I roast you?"

"If you want to."

"Come on, whom do you take me for? Roast my friend. That would never do. Do you want me to put you back in the water?"

"If you want to!"

"Do you advise me to climb again to the twelfth branch of the kapok tree? The last time, following your advice, I climbed up to the twelfth branch and from there, "whoosh!" I jumped . . . oh! how afraid I was at first . . . but you, on the shore, you were waving to me, you were encouraging me in this adventure . . . Do you want us to do it again?"

"If you want to!"

"If I want to. But that is what I want. Here! look, I am going to climb. I am climbing."

It was a really arduous ascent. The large thorns, like rows of spikes, impeded any progress. Kacou Ananzè was bleeding. Still he reached the twelfth branch, looking like a gondola swaying in a current. Suddenly feeling dizzy, Ananzè was dashed to the ground.

Fortunately, he did not die; his exploits would have ended, and we men would have little to tell each other in the evenings . . .

And like all lies, it is through you that mine passes into the ocean . . . to flow around the world . . .

Translated by Marie Legroulx and Peter Sabor

Syl Cheney-Coker

LOOKING FOR THE SPIRIT AT NIGHT

Before my house drinking the peaceful frangipanis
a family of coconut palms shading the nudity of the beach
before my house the termite-infected lemon trees
and the slow movement of the iguana on the iroko tree
it is here that I hear the concerto for death
the wailing cicadas and the howling bats
and the monotonous croaking of the frogs
Sierra Leone with its sad eyes and the medicinal impulse
of a late vulture clearing carcasses off the road
are they brothers of the soul or skeletons of the hour

tonight being Sunday Juba is humid and feeling this heat
I think I'll like to open the antennae of my head
to catch one word one flowering word of hope
before the rain which threatens the night
here where I await the spirit come to live with me
for to be a brother of that spirit . . . Manfred
I write you I call you I make this poem a fountain of your
memory
where I drink your delicate fragrance
and then I can walk through open doors
searching for you hoping that your face is no more a shadow
that you are no more bronze than flesh
brother!

but tonight is so peaceful I am drinking my soul
the cicadas the iguana the vulture and the frogs
the termites the beach the gigantic moths
the invading butterflies chased by the geckos
and the matter-of-fact overdose of my deadly solitude!

George Elliott Clarke

TO SYL CHENEY-COKER

"I have my Nova Scotian madness"
—Syl Cheney-Coker

Though under foreign stars I've dreamt too much,
I have my Nova Scotian madness, still:
Oceanic waves of rhetoric, fog-horn
Anthems, a war-writ, shipyard history,
Translated into song and myth by rum.
I have that whore and bottle heritage,
Yet memories, as well, of churches white,
Of ponds where cluck the parliaments of geese,
Of grapes whose wine sparks dreams and wars! Dear Syl,
I know pines' windy heroics, the strength
Of stone that fights the sea, the sun's courage
To speak with rain or stand silent in shade,
To raise fresh crops of roses, maidenheads,
And sculpt fine art from rough creation.

Oh, Nova Scotian-Sierra Leonean!
Oh, poet-compatriot! I have
my birthright: Howe's democratic tradition;
I remember it even in exile,
Among a strange people, bank towers tall—
The whited sepulchres of Ontario,
Where party government owns all power
And history burns in the streets of towns,
Fooling the dreaming tyrants that they're God!,
Where preachers to bordellos creep, while cops
Patrol and stare at the whole creation.
I want revolution! Flood the stock exchange!
I have my Nova Scotian madness, Syl!
I wander, exiled, but prize it still.

WHEN OUR CORN IS RIPE

When our corn is ripe
Let no illness touch our teeth

We have seen long droughts
and murderous famines
when scant raindrops
tease the earth
and scurrying chickens
take them for corn grains

When our corn is ripe

We have fought stiltmen
who monopolize the sun
basking in the miserable chill
of our abyss
We have wrestled them to the ground
discovering their legs to be flammable straw

When our corn is ripe

We have battled slave makers
and freedom murderers
who ox men for profit
and pillage the earth for greed
they have woken to a setting sun
in the west of their loot

Let no illness touch our teeth
when our corn is ripe

NOT IN MY SEASON OF SONGS

*Sigidi** thirsty for a dance of shame
Craves a festival in the rain
Bees hum peacefully in a fallowing farm
A restless boy punctures their hive
With a crooked stick

You have poked your crooked finger
In the hive of my mouth
A chorus of bees would have stung
Were this my season of song

Yes, I would have told you
About your swollen testicles
Which crook your legs
Like miserable bows,
And your lips thick like hippo skin;
About the elephant legs of your mother
And your father whose head
Rivals a buffalo's own

Had you met me in my season of song
I would have told you what torrents
Swept your father to this land
Your father, the D.O.'s** shit-carrier,
Who hounded kinsmen as tax debtors
And drafted people into forced labour
For the crumbs of the white man's bread

You have really touched me
On my songless day
Or I would have counted all the rats

* earthen effigy
** District Officer

In your hidden shrub
Your uncle the Produce Buyer so fattened
On ugly money he looks like
A bag of cocoa with a small ball for a head
Or his brother the Sanitary Inspector
Who can extract bribes from a corpse

He whose forehead is twin
With a hanging cliff
Let him not peer into other people's faults
The squirrel has lived down its fame for excess
It has put the penis below the scrotum.

CALLING A SPADE

No need hiding
in the tabernacle of words
so easily swept off
by the storm of anger

No need camouflaging
behind a flimsy jungle
of occult id-ioms
the metaphor of protest
flips every leaf
in the book of change

Spade callers they are
who till the most fertile terrains
for the richest harvests
knowing as they do that

the simple word
is the shortest distance
between two minds

There is no petname for
injustice
Poverty
 has no bank for nicknames.

OLIVER TWIST

Oliver Twist can't do this
if so do so
touch your toe under we go
touch the ground and a merry go round,
and mother oh lady says to jump
mother oh grady says to cry
mother oh lady says be white
mother oh grady says be black,
 brown black
 yellow black
 black black
 black pickney stamped English
singing brown skin girl
stay home and mind baby,
growing up la di dah polite
pleasing and thank you ma'am, yet so savage
 union jacked in red
 in white
 in blue
and dyed in black to welcome Her
tiny hand moving slowly backward
slowly forward
painted smile on regal face
from the stately "buh look how shiny"
black limousine with air conditioned crawl,
and little children faint and drop
black flies in the heat singing
Britons never never never
shall be slaves and
all that land of hope and glory
that was not,
black flies in the heat singing
of Hector and Lysander
and such great names as these,
but of all the world's great heroes

there's none that can compare
with a tow row row row row row
of the British Grenadiers and
little black children
marching past stiffly white bloused
skirted blue
overalled and goin' to one big school
feeling we self look so proper—
a cut above our parents you know,
man we was black
an' we was proud
we had we independence
an' massa day done,
we goin' to wear dat uniform
perch dat hat
'pon we hot comb head
jus' like all dem school girls
roun' de empire
learning about odes to nightingales
forget hummingbirds,
a king that forgot
Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth
and burnt his cakes,
about princes shut in towers
not smelly holds of stinking ships
and pied piper to our blackest dreams
a bastard mother, from her weaned
on silent names of stranger lands.

BYERI*

Fang woman of the flying hair,
behind the plexiglass enclosure,
your sweat palm oil and copal;
or is it tears that create
a patina of grief on your body wood?

In the ordinary course of things,
I should have come upon you . . .
as a child maybe . . .
on some ancestor's box of bark,
guarding her bones, her skull.

What do you guard now
Fang woman of the flying hair,
who sweats palm oil and tears
for us, who lost the ordinary course and
now seek you at the Art Gallery of Ontario?

What bones, whose skull do you now guard,
but those of my future, present and past?
Fang woman with the flying hair,
your mouth stretched wide in a silent scream,
is that palm oil or is it your pores that weep?

A hair's breath millennium away from you,
my mouth stretches wide as yours,
in a scream that shatters the glass
and your complicit silence remains
to haunt my questions.

* Byeri:—Reliquary figures of the Fang
people in Gabon.

Guardian of relics, keeper of bones,
Fang woman of the flying hair,
you stand on my grave
and become what you once guarded.
You stand on my grave,
while two tears of palm oil
creep slowly down my screaming face.

Gerald Lynch

In Violet Air

Call it an act of desperation or a crime of passion, if you want. But I call it comic relief. Ask Charismatic Peters about comic relief. Shakespeare does it for God's sake! C'mon, look, it was crowded as the standing-room-only hyppo section of hell in that funeral home. Everybody was hanging onto Baker's old lady and boo-hooing what a terrific guy Paul had been, how smart he could have been if only he'd used *all those brains*. And I definitely didn't say it right to old lady Baker, no matter what McIntyre and those hosebags, Blundy and Lowe, have been saying's the truth. All I did was stand just within earshot of old lady Baker and say to McIntyre, 'Shit, I sure hope to God this doesn't happen to any of the other Baker kids.'

Baker's old lady spun round and slapped me so hard my balls jumped for cover. 'Throw him out!' she shrieked at the funeral director. 'It's all *his* fault!'

And the sweating gofe took me by the collar, gave me the bum's rush through the coffin showroom, and dumped me out back by his big blue garbage bin. I didn't want to hang around in there anyway. I hate crowds.

You'd think I'd said that the rest of the Bakers are going to die like Paul did. Like what was I supposed to say? Uh, duh, geez, Mrs. Baker, Paul sure was one good friend. Too bad it couldn't have been McIntyre here, eh?

Look, Baker O-deed on booze and pills. Okay? Purple City really had nothing to do with it. Right? Right. It's not like it was an act of God, and it wasn't an accident. People get so jittery when some guy who's been slowly killing himself finally does it. The same people who get even more misty when some old shit like John Lennon buys it—people they don't even know for God's sake! Or know only from old records, TV and *People* magazine. Some nag's fart like John Wayne bites the dust and guys' mothers bury their flaring nostrils in the *National Enquirer* to see which of his horses was his favourite cornhole. Forget supper for their surviving kids, toss a tear and whip up that yummy Kraft dinner. Yah! . . . So tell me about it. I'm the hyppo? Unos momentos, signor.

When I told McIntyre about Baker in the Bluewater Arcade, he turned—fingers still flickin'—and said, 'Shit, what a drag. Wonder who he got to buy the booze?' Yah, right. But he wasn't Junior Respect in the

funeral home, was he? And Blundy and Lowe, I told them at Mr. Submarine, and Lowe said, 'Yeah, well, he was okay, sometimes I guess. But like we all gotta go. Wanna bite?' But in the funeral home the two of them didn't stand holding each other's hands like their waterworks might wash them down a sewer, did they? I'm disrespectful? Tell me about it.

Or look at it this way. McIntyre's old lady has all these, uh, mementos of Elvis Presley all over the house: pictures stuck on all the walls, little beerbellied statues of the pig in front of the bar mirror, and his sweating face on a sweatshirt she always wears, her tits floppin' so that the original greasball's zillion chins wiggle death-defiantly. She was disgusting the first time I was there after it happened. Stinking of booze and cigarettes, she tried to bury me in her sagging tits. 'I know just how you feel,' she whimpered, her eyelashes half unstuck and batting mini-tears at the velvet picture of el-greaso behind the bar. 'When Elvis . . . when the King . . . passed . . .'

And old man McIntyre with his brand-new, pre-torn T-shirt and styled punker's haircut, he starts into a story about how his best friend bought it in Vietnam. 'Hey, can you heads dig that they did a lotta acid over there? So maybe ol' Tom—my best friend from highschool, dig it, and a Black—made the big trip in style.' I'm like, uh, hip, Mr. — I mean, Norm. Then he gets sidetracked bragging about how smart he was to scoot across the border at Port Huron to here, the chickenshit. *Whew!* Something smelled in there. *Let me out!*

So let's face it and get it out of the way: people don't give wormshit about anything but themselves. And that's why my little joke in the funeral home (which, by the way, Baker would've loved) is a *big* deal. Ooo, now the hyppos feel involved. Yah, like involved after the fact, like people who run up to mangled cars and gasp, 'Can I help?' Can I help myself to a closer look? . . . Baker hated everything, all the hyppo bullshit.

In our second-to-last English class, during Man-In-Society, our topic was Canada's recent achievements. First of all, Baker wondered out loud if an intelligent alien would crank himself off with Canadarm.

Charismatic Peters, too cool of course to be phased by mere sex, just stared at Baker. 'Would you like to tell us something about the masturbatory art, Mr. Baker? A *master*, I'm sure.' A born comic, Charismatic, that's what you are. Quit teaching for God's sake! Go to Hollywood!

Baker made a quiet kissing noise and cupped the inside of his thigh.

Then Baker cut in on Phyllis Sowinski—Syphilis-the-Sow—who'd been gushing about how sexy and heroic that Ken Taylor guy is. He said loudly to me, 'Who gives a living shit if this brillo-headed *gofe* smuggled a few Yanks out of I-ran? They all work for the C.I.A. anyway. Besides, that Ayatollah guy don't bullshit. It's against his religion.'

Charismatic stopped grinning like a brain-damaged janitor and shouted, 'Baker!'

'The guy's no hyppo,' Baker said. 'He sticks to what he says.' Baker looked worried about how he sounded. He shot me a glance and

returned to normal: 'Even if he does wipe his Ayatollah's asshole with a bone.'

'Baker, I read *Playboy*, too. You and it are casting aspersions on a traditional Muslim, uh, ablution of sorts which you are too ignorant to appreciate.'

'Sounds to me like they don't know their assholes from their bones.'

'Baker, one more rude outburst and it's out the door again.'

Syphilis-the-Sow swivelled back to the front sucking air up her tilted nose like Baker and me were lines she was trying to snort out of our seats. Baker spread his knees, made a loud kissing noise and jabbed his thumb at his crotch. But Sow and Charismatic were already on to Terry Fox.

'All-in-all, it's been a banner year for Canada. And one hears that there are plans afoot — no pun intended — to attempt Mount Ev —' Charismatic stopped himself at the amazing sight of Baker's raised hand. 'Yes, Mr. Ba — Paul? Please, feel free to join us.' Charismatic must have grown bone, standing there wiggling his fingers for Baker to *join* them.

Hands cup-and-saucered on his desk, the meekest, most enquiring frown on his face, Baker cocked his head and asked, 'Uh, didn't that Fox guy only make it halfway?'

'Why yes, Paul, that's correct. Are you, perhaps, implying something quintessentially Canadian in the Marathon of Hope? I.e., the mis-hammered last spike? The faulty fountain pen with which the Queen —'

'And like wouldn't it be more, uh, appropriate, like because of the way he runs, to call it the Marathon of *Hop*?'

It was like Baker had cut a loud one in church just before the first tinkle of the Offertory bell. Charismatic just bowed his head and pointed sideways at the door: 'Ouuu-t.' He couldn't speak for a minute, so strained you could've sliced a dozen washers of his puckered asshole.

So tell me about it. Baker didn't give a shit about anything. Why should I? Especially now. Anyway, we were both gonna quit school soon as we could and head out to Vancouver. Next summer. We would have been sixteen.

And now you hyppos gotta make such a big deal, so other hyppos will think what sensitive assholes you are. You same hyppos who called Baker wimp, twit, jerk, spazz, gofe, loser, burn-out (your favourite). Now you treat me like I'm the one person in the world who hated him. *Me*, his best friend for God's sake! His only friend. Like Blundy and Lowe won't let me do anything till I write a letter of apology to old lady Baker — to be put in the school paper. Hey, tell me about it. Like I pray to the Devil that I never get that horny.

At school they're trying to make me go for regular meetings with the guidance counsellor, an old shit who came to school one day with a safety pin taped to his ear. Yah, uh, right on. Power fists and all that. At the beginning of the one meeting I did go to, he tried to slap my hand, but I pulled back my hand at the last split-second and watched the gofe stumble into a bookshelf crammed with psycho tests and pamphlets

about Catholic, uh, “necking” and tips on how to use safes. Then the twit leaned over to light my cigarette and asked if I’d ever felt, ‘Mm, you know, *attracted* to Paul?’ Sure thing, Saint Freudman, like we took turns reaming each other’s holy tarholes every night. But would you mind panting in the other direction, douchebag, your breath smells like a tuna fish on the rag. . . . Yah, but we weren’t in his office, were we? He knew I couldn’t drop him there. Next time I’m *supposed* to go back, he thinks I’m gonna go in the gym with him so we can beat the living shit out of each other with bats of foam rubber. Yah, right, what time was that? Gotcha. . . . *The living shit*, that’s probably what Baker’s intelligent aliens call the human race.

Mr. Psychology made me take a book by some gimp in Toronto. ‘A close personal friend,’ he wheezed. ‘We’re very close on matters thanatological.’ Yah, right, and very close on matters dung-punching. And get the title of the book: *The Lie of Death*. Sort of grabs you right by the ol’ scrotocular formation, eh? I smoked a joint in the garage, went up to my room and just glanced at the book. I remember the first two sentences: “You, like the vast majority of humanity, probably believe that you are going to die. It’s a lie.” The rest of the book’s about a bunch of panicking old turds trying to top each other’s “OBE’s”—their, uh, “out-of-the-body experiences.” *Whew!* Let me out! Sounds to me like a psycho definition of puking. Out of their minds would be more like it for these people. I mean it, they claim to be able to do something that, if it really was true, would be more fun than fucking. But what do they claim to do? They fly over trees, “like in a dream like,” visit their neighbours and then wow the scientific world by reporting what the hyppos down the street had for supper: “You had meat loaf, potatoes and . . . don’t tell me . . . a vegetable! . . . Okay, but I could see it was some kind of meat. Your chandelier obscured my vision.” The gimp from Toronto keeps reminding you that he’s got all the experiences in a computer, so you can’t argue with him. And there’s a picture of him on the back of the book that shows him wearing a white smock and holding a clipboard.

The truly freaked don’t bother visiting their neighbours. They “so-journ” on unknown planets, come back and, amazingly, describe them in lengthy detail to prove they’ve really been there. “For sport, they have a game sort of like our own hockey, only they don’t use defencemen and every team but one—because they have an odd number—gets into the playoffs.” Give me a break. That jerk’s been watching the Leafs play the Oilers. At least with the X-ray specs they advertise on the back of comics—“See the amazing skeletal structure”—they have the sense to show some little fox in a transparent dress just beyond the goggle-eyed perv’s big bony hand. But those things are a rip-off too.

Anyway, all these into-the-bullshit experiences build up to cases of people who died but didn’t really die. No shit. These hyppos really could redefine what the gimp calls “brain death.” But unos momentos, signor. I’ve got the book right here, uh, somewhere. Read and weep.

“I was undergoing my third bladder operation in as many years, and

the prognosis was poor. Suddenly I was over the operating table, hovering like, and I didn't know whether to leave or return." Go! you astral asshole. "I have two young children, you see." Yah, right, like this one's not only checking out but she's worried that her kids won't have popcorn to go with a special six-hour *Love Boat*. "Then I was in a long dark tunnel that had a light at the end, and I was aware of the presence of my deceased aunt Blaisedelle, the one with the gift. I was always her favourite and she had come to guide me. I sensed something else that was eerily familiar, like *deja vu*, or when you pick up the phone just before it rings. I've always suspected that I, too, have a special gift that way." The woman who has everything. "Oh, it was like something I left when I was born, some power that remains just beyond apprehension in this illusory sojourn." You got 'er, Lazarus, its called your brain. "It was a warm light like a magnet of love, and I felt this awful pull of overwhelming LOVE!!!" Yes-yes, now we're getting somewhere. I've felt that awful pull myself since Blundy and Lowe cut me off. "But then Aunt Blaisedelle said that I was not yet prepared to pass over, that Harvey could not carry the mortgage alone at sixteen percent and bring the kids up in what I considered to be the proper fashion. And just like that, my urologist was waking me up." I hope Harv and the kids sued him. "Life now seems more sacred, more mysterious, and less important to me. And I've not had trouble with my bladder since my OBE." Piss off.

One thing I know for sure: I'll bet you could go through that whole book and there wouldn't be one case of somebody Baker's or my age. There isn't. Of course not. It's only old farts who're scared to death of dying. Look, nobody's gonna be afraid of drowning in the middle of a desert. Right? Right.

The thing that pisses me off is that everybody thinks I've gotta be sorry and scared, too. Well I'm not. Neither was Baker. Anyway, I tried to tell him to take it easy. Okay?

On our last night together — Baker's last night, period — he kept sucking back the pure alcohol, not bothering to mix it with the Gatorade. He was eating so many bennies I thought he'd either pass out or puke. There was only one thing that could bring him back. Though I didn't like using it too much, I said we should do some Purple City.

'Yah,' he groaned, his eyes slitted and swollen like a bad fighter's. 'Purple City! You an' me!'

We were the only two people in the whole world who knew what Purple City was. I discovered it, last Christmas Eve during Midnight Mass at Our Lady of Mercy on the corner of London and Christina. I'd had to leave the crowded church. The sweet stinking perfume from the old ladies and the boozy cigarette breath from the old men had me ready to honk down the back of the pious hyppo begging favours in front of me. I hate crowds, so did Baker, who quit going to Mass when he was ten. And there's nothing worse than a Christmas crowd at Midnight Mass, all pissed up and full of hyppo goodwill, wondering if they'd spent more than they'd get back. So I went outside for a smoke and breath of fresh

air—a real act of faith and hope in Sarnia with its stinking Chemical Valley.

For once the whole world felt empty, still and together, like the Yanks and the Russians had finally gotten around to dropping some neutron bombs. The sky was clear and packed with stars, but there were millions of light years between them. It was like there was a big beautiful dome covering just me and the world. It wasn't cold, either. But I began to feel jittery standing at the front of the church and staring up along the beam that lit the cross. Look, I was already worried about Baker. Okay?

He'd begun drinking and drugging alone, heavily and every day. His old man and old lady didn't give a shit, neither did his older brothers and sisters. Okay, if they did, they didn't do anything about it. And that's all that matters now, not the boo-hoo-in'. They did nothing but whine stuff like, 'Pau-aul, don't be such a burn-out.' Then they'd laugh at him and pop themselves and him another beer. Because Paul *was* one funny guy with a few brew in him. But there was really nothing I could do. He was too smart for me.

'Look around for fuck's sake,' he'd once said, pissed-off because we'd not been able to score some brew or bennies. 'There's nothing left for us. No work, nowhere to go. The old shits'll soon have a war to get rid of us. Don't tell me about buddy-buddies in our own apartment out West. There's zilch left for us. I'm getting to hell outta here.'

You couldn't argue with the guy. Sober, he was too smart. Half-stoned, he was funnier than Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy put together, then violent. Gone, he was dead to the world. *I just didn't know what to do.* Okay? Give me a break. Believe me, for the first time in my life I was worried sick about someone else.

I felt jumpy, too, outside the church because I was waiting for the hyppos inside to start singing again and ruin everything. I actually thought for a split-second to pray. Why not? According to Charismatic Peters, Jesus had all the answers. Yah, right: oh, Jesus, help-me-help-me-help-me! Cross my heart I won't be a hyppo any more if You do. . . . Yah, but Jesus didn't buy it for Himself, too, did He? He knew what hyppos He'd have to grow up with. I mean, shit, just look—one of His own men turned on Him!

So for no good reason, I turned and stared into the spotlight. It didn't hurt my eyes, so I moved closer, and closer, till I was standing about ten feet in front of it. I stared until I could make out the shape of the big flat bulb like an A-bomb mushroom, then the spidery filament like jittery lightning. Dear God, give me some new way to distract Baker. I'm the only one he'll even consider listening to. If I give up on him, he'll be totally alone.

I was worried, honest to God. But at the same time I couldn't help thinking how good I was for worrying about Baker. Now that's a hyppo for you.

When I turned away I was blind. Good God, what've I done! Baker's cost me my sight! . . . Then the world came back. Everything was pur-

ple. The Chemical Valley downriver had a beautiful purple halo. A miracle! I felt light as air. *Whoa*, up on tiptoe. I didn't know what it was, but maybe if I told Baker —

The hymn exploded from inside: 'No-o-el, no-o-el, no-o-el, NO-O-EL! . . .' Brought me right down. Sounded like they were begging God for a break: NO-o-hell, no-o-hell . . . *Please*, God, tell us hyppos it ain't so and we promise to fill the place for You again at Easter, just for You.

I went inside and sat through the last half-hour, everything still purple. I took Communion, though you're not supposed to full of sin. I returned to my seat, closed my eyes and dared God to strike me dead right then and there. When I opened my eyes the purple was gone. Father — 'Call-me-Pat-just-Pat-you hosers' — Padega came around the altar as usual with his fag's hands steeped on his chest, his pink cheeks beaming like he'd just deep-throated the burning bush.

I shoved my hands in my pockets when Padega told us to turn and wish our neighbours a Merry Christmas. Yah, right, we're groovy Catholics. I stared at the wheezing old shit beside me with a look that said, touch, gofe, and I'll break your fucking thumbs so you never touch anybody again. When everybody was leaving. I made it a test to twist and slide sideways so I didn't brush anybody. When Padega stuck out his paw at the door, I gave him a look that said, back off, you bullshit artist. But I wasn't really pissed off. I was giddy as a kid with a gift. A riddle, a mystery, and a secret for Baker, all in one.

And Purple City became a secret between just Baker and me. For a while it worked. Sometimes to bug the other kids we'd let the name slip. For a while the others had an excuse to talk to Baker, and he tolerated them.

Wendy Shaeffer of all people — a nun-in-training if there ever was one — came closest to blowing the cover: 'I know what it is. It's when they drape all the statues and the Eucharist in purple during Lent, like now. Ha-ha, I got it. You think you're *so* smart, Paul Baker. You and your buddy Benning.'

'Slut,' sneered Baker. 'Only thing you've got is shit for brains and a twat like where the gym dividers meet.'

In Baker's last English class, Charismatic Peters asked us to name 'natural ways of getting high.' Baker whispered loudly, 'Purple City,' which completely stole the class's attention from Charismatic's list of charity bullshit: visiting croaking old people, free babysitting for Sarnia's whining welfare cases when they go out for supper, teaching crippled kids to high-jump (you know, like that's the thing that'll help them survive as crippled adults).

Charismatic came stomping down the aisle to the second-last desk and stared at me in the last. 'What, Mr. Benning, *is turtle city?* We've all been excluded quite long enough from your and your *boyfriend's* secret.'

Yah, right, we're homos. 'I didn't say it, sir. Baker did. He's always talking aloud and disrupting the class, distracting me from your informative and, if I may say so, entertaining lectures.' I heard Baker snort a

laugh. 'And I think, sir, that the troubled youth said *purple city*.' I can talk any way I want. So can Baker.

'Well, Baker?'

Baker pulled a straight face: 'Sir, it's when, sir, you go to church, sir—'

'I told you!' Wendy Shaeffer squealed, then nearly melted at her first searing look from Charismatic. Peters' head vibrates and his eyes bug like he's squeezing out a totem-pole turd.

But what was Baker doing? My eyes burned.

'Baker,' barked Charismatic like Mr. Commando in Christ's guerrilla corps, 'I won't tolerate blasphemy. And if you go out this time there's no coming back.'

'Unos momentos, signor. I mean it. You go into church during Lent, just like Miss Shaeffer said. You face the purple-draped host and do this.' Baker stood in the aisle, sort of dipped, grabbed his crotch with both hands, pulled up on it and made a loud kissing noise: '*Tell, me, a-bout, it!*'

Charismatic went stumbling backwards down the aisle like he was falling: 'Out! Out! Out! . . .'

That was the closest we ever came to giving Purple City away. Now, the cover's been blown, everybody knows. Baker was a hot item in the *Sarnia Spectator*: "Sarnia Boy Dies of Drug and Light Overdose." But look, the point is that I could already see that Baker was on his way down and out last Christmas. I tried still. Purple City just wasn't enough. . . . Or it was too much. But let's not get all misty and confused. It's really plain and simple.

That last night, I had to put one of Baker's arms around my shoulders, mine around his waist, and all but drag him down to Our Lady of Mercy. Whenever I eased my hold, he slumped to the ground and lay there with a sneer on his face. At OLM I stood and balanced him on the front lawn before the big double doors. I was fishing in my pocket for a joint when he threw out his arms and screamed clearly: 'Tell me about it!' He fell flat on his face and powdered a few chunks of white dog shit that had made it through the winter.

I turned him over and tried to shake him awake: 'Burn-out, you really sick?'

He puked pinkish slop out the side of his twisted mouth and sort of wagged his tongue at it. He reminded me of that mutt of a hose in *The Exorcist*. I had to laugh. What else could I do?

I sat him up, grabbed his collar and dragged him over to the spotlight. He collapsed against the big aluminum socket, then kind of hugged it. Holding on, he made it to his knees and hauled himself around to face the light.

'Not so fucking close!'

But he moved his head even closer. 'Tell . . . me . . . about . . . it,' he whimpered and touched his eyeballs to the glass.

I jerked him away. I shouldn't have waited so long. Okay?

He flopped onto his back, arms spread, eyes wide open. He sort of

laughed and cried silently at the same time. 'I can't see a thing,' he said, sounding stone-cold sober all of a sudden. Then he screamed, 'My purple universe!' closed his eyes and began jerking about on his stomach like he was trying to fuck the world.

His purple universe? The ungrateful burn-out. I stepped forward and stared into the spotlight. I was nearer than I'd ever been before because I figured I needed a stronger dose than normal. I could feel the heat, my eyeballs hurt. That close, the filament looked like jittery forked lightning. I got lost thinking. Was the burn-out worth all this trouble? If I took him to Van I'd have to look out for him all the time. I'd be the only one who worked, caring for him like he was a brain-damaged brother. . . . Still, he was the smartest guy I'd ever known. Really. And Baker knew he was a genius. Ask the guidance counsellor. Baker said he'd told him that he had the highest IQ in the history of the school. That's why Charismatic Peters hated Baker, because Baker knew everything was bullshit and didn't want to be anything. Just like me.

When I turned away I couldn't see a thing, just a pinkish flesh-colored blankness, and I couldn't breath. It was like I was crowding myself. It took longer than ever for the world to return. Then I had barrel vision worse than ever. And things weren't purple, they were . . . I don't know, white almost, then white around a point of black, like burning charcoal ready for the meat. I could hear my brain sizzlin', actually imagined I could smell it frying, a stink like sulphur in the lab. Baker wasn't where my barrel vision pointed. And here it comes, hyppos, snuggle up and get smug—I was glad.

I cranked my head about like a gun on a tank and spotted Baker stumbling near the evergreen bushes at the side of the church steps. It was like looking down a tunnel (yah, just like Mrs. OBE). He stood bent backwards, arms held like he was going to hug the church, head tilted to the steepled cross and the crowded stars. He was mumbling something I couldn't make out for fear my vision wouldn't widen this time. Then it did. The purple came oozing in from everywhere like oily waves. And I had to snort a laugh at Baker's last few staggering steps in my Purple Universe.

He walked into the evergreen bush, draped himself across it, then rolled off to the side and lay still. I carried him into the church and dumped him in the little on-base pew for the Confessional. I got Padega from the rectory and he phoned for the ambulance. It turned out Baker was not only dead but stone blind.

After I got thrown out of the funeral home, I went to the Bluewater Arcade and met this gofe who'd just come back from out West. He looked like he was at least thirty: long greasy hair like on a die-hard heavy-metal groupie, sleazy eyes and a needle-freak's yellow-green skin. But when he flipped out his wallet to prove how much money he'd made, I checked out his driver's licence and saw that he was only nineteen. Anyway, he decided me. Imagine all that bread for screwing rich old hosebags! And

I'm pretty good at it. Ask those scuzz, Blundy and Lowe, if they remember the good old days.

The only thing I regret about being thrown out of the collective boo-hoo is that I wanted to be there to see Baker buried. Everything's still purple, but I see fine. So it would've been a rush. And I'd have stayed to see them fill in the grave, not like you hyppos, all holding hands and making a community hot-tub of the grave with your purple waterworks.

So, you can either put all this in your paper as my apology to old lady Baker, or you can clip it into joined dolls and cram it up your collective asshole. But don't waste your time trying to get ahold of me. I'm heading out to Van today, where nobody can touch me.

Wisława Szymborska

EXPERIMENT

In addition to the main movie,
in which the actors did all they could
to move me and even make me laugh,
they featured an interesting experiment
with a head.

A moment ago this head belonged—
now it had been severed,
everyone could see
that it didn't have a body.
Tubes hanging from its neck
connected it to an apparatus
thanks to which the blood
continued to circulate.
The head was doing well.

Its eyes followed a moving light
without signs of pain or even surprise.
It pricked up its ears when the bell rang.
With its moist nose it could tell the difference
between the smell of lard and odorless nothing,
and licking its lips with obvious relish
it salivated in honour of physiology.

Nice-doggie head,
faithful-doggie head,
when it was stroked it half-closed its eyes,
believing that it was still part of the whole
that bends its back under a caress
and wags its tail.

I thought of happiness and was afraid.
For if only that mattered in life,
the head
was happy.

Julian Tuwim

AQUARIUM

It is a watery realm. Light here is shy.
Plants lazily turn into fish.
And I, wavily, watch wonders multiply
And populate the ocean behind glass with thoughts like fish.

The sad stage hazes in this cubic metre
of ocean depths, elements in retirement.
The water like mortally green air
plays tricks with lines that break and wax.

Marine butterflies glide fashioned out of vapours,
half-flowers, panting, what if they start growing?
You think: silvery, finny moments ripple,
you think: how sad to be the spring of fish.

You think long, with feeling, and your eyes,
the dim eyes of someone drowned turn moon-eyed,
water-reflected — gaping hydromantic
they draw into blind orbit the melancholy sea.

*Both poems translated from the Polish
by Andrzej Busza and Bogdan Czaykowski*

George Amabile

OBSOLETE NOTEBOOK

Minor Amendments
have changed the price of blood.

Yesterday we
believed we could know
what went on. Sunset.
Rain in the streets.
Then shop became a verb.
The universe opened
and wouldn't stop rushing away.

On weekdays
the parks are closed
to civilian personnel.
Benefits bankroll
unimpeachable sources.
Books are restricted to airports
buses and queues.

Our clothes are all
we worry about.
If a child runs naked into the street
it will be taken
by agencies and groomed.

Persiflage sells more
records than all other bands combined.

There is one newspaper
published under a hundred different names.
Sporting events invoke the sudden death rule.
Even casual sleep
is monitored by satellite.

Those of us who forget
our dreams can buy them back
in video cassette for a nominal fee.

We all feel free
to do nothing.

The birds leave early.
No one can find them and
they never come back.
The sky is pure as a bell jar.
Leaves of deciduous trees
turn blue or black or white
but never fall. Snow
burns our skin like dry ice.
By spring, the rivers hit an all time low.
A sailboat melts south of Toronto.

Gasoline. Gasoline.
Those of us who can still afford it
dab it behind our ears
spray it into our genital hair
or splash it on our faces after a shave.

The future hovers
like a mirage getting ready to jell.
We've done some serious
waiting. Now
we are almost afraid
to believe in such happiness.
We tremble before tomorrow.
Soon it will come
and everything will stay that way forever.

Fred Booker / *Three sections* from IN SPACES WE LIVE

(3)

Some midwife who wore
paint and jewelry made from teeth
to boast
left a pair of thumbprints
on his scalp where no hair grows.

She checked his birth
ashamed of the legacy she left
white piracy of the dark continent
the rape of his mother, and
the lynching of faith, hope and charity.

He barely fought his way
from that abyss to this
under the lash of his father's black pride
and ambition for him to excel
like Martin Luther King Jr.

A shadow of the vernal dream
fleeing from a place which gave him
a reflection he couldn't accept
nearly dying in this foreign place
which gives him no reflection at all,

he takes his head in his hands
plants his fingers in those ancestral grooves
not knowing whether to pull or push.

(6)

I prowl the landscape of my country
wet lungs full of compost vapour
waterlogged
because it rains gumboots and
fishermen's panchos out here.

I pick animus
off blue conifers
bark mulch trails and
from between the lines of pulped pages
of the *Vancouver Sun*
objecting to turbaned Sikhs
and the currying of Canada.

Like a wide-mouthed receptacle
conveniently placed
I collect the litter of bigots
and the careless from
the landscape of my country.

RUM-RUNNING

A Maritimer's new life—
I am at the edge of my seat; water boiling
Mud slaking

A kiln's turn-around
At the city's end. Fumes rise up
And swirl

Across the ocean, Atlantic's swell
And billow. I taste cod
In Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad
And Demerara—more trade. In Newfoundland
Later, I lie drunkenly—

Wind wafting. Whole fields of sugar-cane
And beet. Backyard and tenement
Hear the police siren. Now run, man!

An urchin's scampering feet,
Shirt tails flying in the wind.
Such ragged talk afterwards, scattering
Fowls, ducks. A goat's lone grunt—

Good as a bray. I hold on to a wad of notes
Like a tufted beard, dancing my way
To paradise. Half-sotted, I echo disdain—
I continue to make believe

Patterning myself whole, dreams coming
Alive across the ocean, a ship canting,
Land lifting up, the fumes yet in my nostrils
My body's own heat—
I continue to rise like yeast

J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada

THREE CHEERS TO THE MOSQUITO

Three cheers to the mosquito
Whose lank legs chased away bondage,
Whose poisonous proboscis meted out venom
Like the gardener's goodwill to flowers.
Out of his smallness we've earned our largess.

Three cheers to the mosquito
Whose songs—albeit succulent jazz
Blitzing Egret ears—were without rhythm,
without rhyme.
In his music we've discovered meaning.

Three cheers to the mosquito of Bussa*
Whose tongue stung the Mungo Parks,
Fertilized our souls, our soils
With white filth and flesh.
In his thankless task we wear our frock of freedom.

Three cheers to the mosquito
That gives us Iba** week after week
But has assured our manhood year after year . . .
The Quines are sold in chemist shops!

Three cheers to the mosquito
That sang to the ears of our 'benefactors'
Mnnnn . . . Let them rule themselves . . .
Mnnnn . . . with the harshness of a Satan . . .
Mnnnn . . . your saintly, civilizing mission
They can do without . . . mnnnnnnnnnn . . .

* a Northern Nigerian town where Mungo Park, the explorer, was said to have died from malaria.

** Igbo word for malaria.

Miron Bialoszewski

MONASTIC CYNIC-WISE I LISTEN
OR
THIN IS THE SKIN OF THE BARREL

over there

the objective
rain
stands
like a pyramid

while nearby

ears
get drunk
on one brand of gutter-spout

truth

flows non-stop into the barrel

the minimalist
Diogeneses
of my ears
dwell in it

*Translated from the Polish
by Andrzej Busza and Bogdan Czaykowski*

Claire Harris

UNTITLED

In October bare trees leaves that run and clot
on park lawns the lawns still patched with green
I walk the raw paths through winds that crowd me

This autumn comes around before I'm ready
pulls at my slack time tautening
for a moment no existence at all

Behind the grave apartment towers clouds
pile up rattle spare bones of rain leaves
lift and swirl Among all that gold red brown
the air is winged crackling dizzy

why now her song surprises me I'm not sure
memory spills from my lips ribbons
crisp satin ribbons grosgrain So long ago

My mother her fingers part my hair make
four neat plaits that dovetail on each side
become one that is crossed and pinned

She holds out a rainbow of ribbons says
choose one ribbons hanging from her fingers
like paths How could I choose when any choice
meant a giving up Years later shucking the island

As painful as shucking skin Yet I left
weaving a new space to trap the voice
I thought I could must return my navel string

buried where the rich fantasy of peoples
stranded by empire jostled on those stunned hummocks
history's low road under the bruising sun

Now loving this chill autumn rain I know it has been too long
A memory of dark hands intelligent with a child's
ribbons Ideal hands vulnerable among ruins
something to conjure with I turn and walk home

ÁFÁ

i remember that dream
i had
in which God was making
the world
having made the earth
the sun and the moon
God was dead tired
and wanted to rest
but too much mixed clay
was left unused
so God
he said to the Word
quick
let us use up this remaining clay
and so they made the present generation
of the sick
the mad and the damned
throwing remainder eyes and ears
here and there
wherever they fell

when all was done
God took his rest
and the next day
the very first thing
He hewed me
out of the rocks
eyes ears all were intact
then God
he said to me
go and make the world
as I have made thee

correct my mistakes
but do not excel me
or I shall cut you down
and the dogs
will scoop the flesh
from your bones

MY FRIEND AND I

times were
i measured my words in wavelengths
my thoughts in light years
and my life was timeless
now
they summarise life on a tombstone
just a piece of stone

one day my friend said
you know my friend
dont you
the beautiful one she said to me
my baby isnt she lovely
look at my baby
and i took one look at the thing she called baby
and i said
it is soil

 nothing but soil and water
 soil and water
and my friend was unbelieving
but three days later the thing was dead
and she cried like hell
my friend did

i am the daughter of a rock
she said
whoever owns these eyes
that keep staring at me
will get tired and close them
for i am the daughter of a rock
and i said

a rock indeed
 but guard your rock well
 my friend
 guard him well
and she was so confident
she did not know that these days
even rocks get cut
anyway they did not *cut* the rock
no
they used dynamite

Tamba Ninimba Komba

APARTHEID

Wash
all coloured clothes
separately
and drip them dry
on a white line.

Eduardo Bettencourt Pinto

IN MY FINGERS

Rose, bud of my dawn,
water which, between my fingertips
becomes tide;
note the wild cane,
note how the sea approaches your lips,
how haltingly I approach death
where the flower of your name
blooms from my breath,
how, from doorways of words,
I peer down the vanishing contrail
of clouds which stream from your hair.

*Translated by Rosa Bettencourt Pinto
and Laurel A. Wade
From Mão Tardia*

Tchicaya U Tam' Si

NOCTURNAL SAILOR

Tell me
what makes the sea high
what makes the sea tipsy
for whom is the sea crazy

who will bind waves and billows
together?

The sea leaves I arrive
the sea arrives I leave
thus we danced
all one equinoctial night
according to a code

and according to that code
five steadfast continents
set out adrift
with each paraph
that a comet signs
in the sky that carries me away
from the waves' embrace
the too lewd waves
at night in the summer
In fact I was a child layed on a bed of vervain

My bed of vervain
sometimes reeked of seaweed
every new moon
my mother whispered

A question must be asked:
tell me about that seaweed . . .

The sea leaves, I arrive
the sea arrives, I leave
thus we danced

Five continents drift away
A man flees his shadow
The sea opens her water mouth

Her breath reeks the seaweed of my vervain bed
have I never fled my shadow?
I was only dancing
at night my mourning my shadow

The water reeks the desert rose
which sea is richer in corals than my revolt?

Large fists arrive black
on the astral river's water
reddening the piping-hot steel of my passion!

Translated by Dennis Egan

Beverly Simons

The Gift

When the first package of books arrived, the sender had been all but forgotten. He was referred to, and then never by name, on the rare occasions when Marie, forced by Henry's inattention, chided him . . .

"Ah, but remember . . ."

And that was enough. Close again in conspiratorial warmth, they remained the envy of their circle of friends.

Dr. Henry Drossler and his wife, Marie-Claire, lived comfortably enough on the edge of the city. Not far enough out to be considered part of suburbia or close enough to be chic, their home was furnished with taste but not ostentation. They had a fair library, made up of more than the predictable accumulation of university books and books "one ought" to read, a record collection that leaned to classical music and jazz of the late forties and fifties, and they boasted three original oils, happily discovered by the Drosslers in secondhand shops. Not brilliant canvasses, to be sure, but reasonably priced, yielding them extra pleasure in conjuring the circumstances of the artists.

For instance, how long had it taken this one artist to execute his minor vision? Child balanced on unlikely-looking bridge, anatomy crude, pastoral landscape, the effect sentimental but charming. Would he have suffered more or less than a Rembrandt? Had he conjured them, the viewers, as they were him, guessing that his work would one day be hanging in their house? Had the Drosslers been included in his composition?

But the Drossler home was characterized not by the books, the records, nor even by the three original canvasses. Regardless of hour or season, a fire burned continuously in the hearth, which had been placed by chance or design in such a way that the pulsing shadows and reflections reached into every room, making the house throb like a living thing. Their rhythms were determined by it.

Marie-Claire would rise soundlessly, wakened by her knowledge that the last ember was about to turn black and static. Henry, too, woke to tend it, though tuned less to the fire than to Marie's urgency. Like worried parents passing in the dawn light, they fed the flames that consumed fir, cedar, hemlock, alder, driftwood they'd gathered from a nearby beach, with a quiet unremitting ardour. They marvelled at the des-

perate shapes taken by the dying wood before it crumbled, at times almost human. Before Marie's thoughts could follow the disappearing light, Henry, watching her, would quickly stoke the fire until its brilliance hid the process that nourished it.

Out for dinner, shopping, at work, surrounded by guests, one cell of their awareness was reserved for listening.

Since moving to Vancouver, Dr. Drossler had established a modest but solid practise. Unlike some of his colleagues he worked within limited hours. Those who did call on him at night or during the weekend were never reprovved; the doctor's manner remained concerned and polite, but they were made to feel uncomfortable somehow, as though they were being spoken to and touched by someone absent. A discomfiting experience. Yet inevitably patients returned to Dr. Drossler within his posted hours, and colleagues rang back. Perhaps for reassurance.

There was some brief talk of magic. It was suggested that if one looked into the doctor's files one would find more than a list of diagnoses and appointments. Human souls flattened against each other in alphabetical order? Not as ridiculous as it sounds. Tissue and blood are equally useful to the two sciences. But in Drossler's case it was rumour, begun by a man of peculiar pride, who'd been so shaken by his nighttime depersonalization that only slander could call back his reflection to his morning mirror.

The doctor's friends would have laughed if such a rumour had reached them. The only thing curious about Marie and Henry Drossler, who, taken separately, might be considered dull, was the endurance of their quiet passion. When together, one experienced in them a smugness, a secret and irritating glow, embarrassing in a middle-aged couple. Henry, sallow, dark and balding, Marie, thickening but still pretty, were apparently made more attractive by it. There had been attempts, several *motivated by spleen but some become surprisingly sincere*, to sexually entice one or the other of them. But even the most blatant of these advances left the Drosslers charming and elusive. Worse, unaware of their friends' overtures.

When the first package arrived, both Marie-Claire and Henry thought there had been some mistake. They examined the wrapping carefully. Heavy brown paper well bound with twine, the label had been correctly addressed to both of them, postmarked London, England, no return address. Inside they found three books of love poetry, well kept but obviously used. The title page of each was torn out.

Conversation at dinner was animated. They lit three candles at the fire and carried them ceremoniously to the table so that the warm central presence of the house would be with them not only by reflection. (Light turns corners; in the dusk the livingroom merged with the kitchen and dining area in the dark reflecting windows.) They set the table with German china, with crystal and silver-plated cutlery.

Henry tipped the slim neck of the decanter again and again, knowing

how Marie delighted in the elusive plum of light in the base of her glass and how sad she became when it disappeared under her tongue. (In this light still his young wife.) He sipped the umber wine slowly. It was as though they'd returned to that secret evening when a stranger, who'd asked to be left unidentified, had sent the waiter with a bottle of wine to their table, his toast to their awkward, furtive love. Now, twenty years later, another stranger, (could it be the same?) had sent them a second gift.

Their desire for each other was kindled. Each wrinkle of Marie's familiar body was a revelation to him. And Marie-Claire, perhaps she was stimulated by the three strange books, or it may have been she saw that night with the eyes of the sender, but she perceived their fire with peculiar clarity. Repeated and commented on by reflection and shadow, it flared from a private skull image to become one with her. She astonished herself and Henry with her daring; though, to be accurate, the astonishment came later, for in that time together their subtle rhythms merged without self-consciousness, as innocent as the terrible flames. Her belly was the sea and he was lightning. Within their margins all life spiralled. Forests burned; gilt-costumed dancers spraying death and glory, moonfaced ephabi, vengeful crones and heroes all rose briefly in wistful fury and subsided with them. Marie was filled with compassion for the worlds dependent on their touch.

So sure were they that they'd achieved the consummate expression of their love that the Drosslers refused at first to believe the dark chasm that was their hearth. On her knees, Marie-Claire thrust her hands into the ashes, but though there was still the memory of fire in the heat, there was no light. Quickly, ignoring metal tools, unaware of pain, they built a new fire, hoping an excess that sent dangerous sparks scattering into the room would erase the momentary death.

Neither of them could sleep. Marie sat silently watching the flames, while Henry, pretending that nothing untoward had happened, checked his appointment books and worked on a speech he was to give at a medical convention. Surreptitiously he watched Marie.

When the second package came they weren't surprised. Nor were they surprised by the name inscribed on the three title pages, this time not torn out . . . Henry James Kalsinger . . .

"Ah, but remember . . ."

His name had become as comfortably elusive to them as a childhood nightmare, yet they both took for granted that he should reappear in this way. It was like him.

In the third book, "Essays on the Transubstantiation of Christ", (religious books this time), Marie found a short note.

"With you always, my dears.

HENRY."

Yes, it was like him, and like his virulent humour.

The mail was delivered a second time that day. A special delivery let-

ter. A London solicitor, a Mr. Kripps, begged to inform them that Henry James Kalsinger had died and lovingly bequeathed his library entire to Henry and Marie-Claire Drossler. It was the collection of a peculiar lifetime, as they must know; it would be shipped to them in lots as requested by the deceased. He, Kripps, wished to assure them that the eccentric choice was not his, he begged their patience, etcetera.

The Drosslers replied immediately to say they didn't want Mr. Kalsinger's books, not anything from Mr. Kalsinger, and surely there must be some mistake, since they hadn't seen or heard from him in twenty years. But they knew the letter would make no difference, even as they wrote it, even if there were a Mr. Kripps and the address on the letter-head did exist, even as they mailed it.

Some days nothing was delivered; others, one package would arrive, perhaps two, more rarely, crates of them. Dr. Drossler took to phoning home at odd hours. He had the foolish unexamined notion that if Marie accepted and opened the books without him there. . . He went no further. But he grew absentminded, even irritable, at work. A vulnerability, new to him, unaccountably made his nurse's uniform less white and raised the sound level in his waiting room.

Piece by piece, the body of H.J.K. was being sent like an old castle across the Atlantic to lie resurrected in their home. His smell was on the bindings. Marie remembered it.

Kripps wrote to say he was puzzled at their reluctance. Although one might reject the idea of a permanent lodger, surely not his books. These were things that reflected only his taste and needed not to be waited on like a living person. Yet at the same time, it would be a kindly gesture of friendship to the deceased, since Mr. Kalsinger had spoken of the Drosslers in terms of the highest respect and affection.

His familiar sweat of excitement. She told herself it was for dusting that she'd begun to handle them.

Henry returned to find Marie surrounded by empty crates and books, some open, some marked, some stacked. Though he wanted to object, he said nothing. She approached him like a guilty child, with one book still held behind her back. Object to what? He felt a fool at the thought. Kripps was right. He could afford to be generous to a dead man. Amused at both of them, he embraced her. Yet he was puzzled at an extra tingle of pleasure mixed with discomfort.

Marie-Claire began to take notes. She began also to plot the deliveries on a calendar, as though she were trying to discover a pattern. Her anticipation as she waited for the mailman excluded Henry, though she hid nothing from him. Like a schoolgirl expecting love tokens. It irri-

tated him. Was it his imagination or did she, too, find pleasure in his growing discomfort? Worse: was she indifferent to it?

In the night, wakened by her absence, longer than needed for her to stoke the fire, Henry found Marie reading by the light of the flames, a foolish thing to do, hard on the eyes. She looked up at him, unsmiling; her eyes reflected the last image from the book open on her lap. Her fingers covered the print, marking it. She allowed him to lead her gently back to bed.

It was politics now, with an occasional volume of philosophy. Just as strangers chitchat about a variety of subjects, at times exposing inner perspectives of personality, then quickly retreating, to themselves again before daring to expose a little more, as friendship and trust develop: so it seemed to Marie, through the books, in their apparently erratic order of shipment, Henry James Kalsinger was reintroducing himself. "Books are diaries," she explained. "They measure accurately the soul's hunger and its deflection." She considered her thesis confirmed when she discovered the books were annotated in a way characteristic of their friend. He had cut phrases, sentences, pictures, sometimes single words, out of the volumes.

Henry I and Henry II, she'd called them. Her two Henrys. They'd been closer than brothers, unrelated, but so alike in thought process and temperament that she'd barely noticed how and when her passion had slipped from one to the other of them. Henry K. was famous for his fierce temper; his humour could be vicious; they'd both experienced it. It was when the stranger had sent wine to their table that they'd realized it was only a matter of time before he would discover them. Marie-Claire remembered the nauseous terror of their flight from Montreal, how they'd oscillated between confidence and cowardice, the extremes bound together by irrepressible wild laughter. The covenant of cowards is as binding as that of lovers. They were double knit.

After her initial dread, Marie began to enjoy herself. Transformed by the attention of the growing library, she teased both Henrys, changing her clothes, even her hairdo, as she bloomed a second time.

To tease Henry II, she read the books voraciously. To tease the other Henry, she flirtatiously left them half read until her hunger for them drew her back. Like a coquette she would approach a heavy volume of Kant, then spin away from it, choosing instead a book of verse or humour. It was as though she were surrounded by eyes, eyes of one man, eyes of all of them.

Henry watched Marie-Claire jealously as she changed. She began to lose weight, but colour returned to her cheeks, or was she using

makeup? — a habit he'd disliked and checked in her after their marriage. When she lay against him at night, he wondered which Henry she was murmuring to.

He regretted that he'd teased her for being fastidious. She spent little time now straightening the house or preparing meals. Yet, he noted, she bathed each morning, and prepared herself as if she were going out, which she'd rarely done in the past. It was for the day's reading.

The Drosslers had enjoyed reading aloud to each other before sleep. Now Marie was too impatient to explain what she'd read during the day while the doctor had made his rounds. Like a seven year old child, this time without pride, Henry was forced back to the loneliness of inner experience. He remembered the first book he'd read to himself, when, still painfully forming the words with his lips, he had proudly contained the sounds in his skull. The "inner ear". It was a curse. He began to imagine that inside her, Marie had grown another set of ears, another pair of eyes, another total being, whom he was unable to see or reach.

It was quite by accident that he discovered Marie-Claire at the library. He'd gone himself to research a disease, one which he remembered vaguely from his training years, but until now had never seen reported in North America. It was with an excitement he'd despaired of feeling again in medical research that he compared lists of symptoms with those he'd jotted down from a patient. Then he saw her. She was sitting alone at a table covered with books, writing rapidly, hurriedly turning pages, pushing books away from her, pulling others near. Her greed repelled him.

What if the missing fragments were part of a message from the dead man that would be completed with the last shipment? Paragraphs had been neatly removed from pages of their "gift", sometimes sentences or phrases, sometimes illustrations or fragments of them. A particular piece of anatomy, the nose, had been carefully cut from an illustrated edition of James' *PORTRAIT OF A LADY*. One book had margins intact only. Henry had attributed it to Kalsinger's temperament. Innocent objects had often struck him as offensive. Or, though it would have been mean to voice it, he could imagine K. maliciously maiming his bequest. But if it were anything more than Kalsinger's rage or malice. . . That she might decipher it without him present flooded Henry with a feeling he didn't like to identify.

He waited for Marie-Claire to report to him. When she didn't, Henry tried to make her trip to the library sound as furtive as he knew it to be. But his accusations were left unfinished, stopped by the absentminded hunger at the base of her eyes.

That night he woke, offended and roused by her girlish laughter from where she sat, reading, at the fireplace. She held the book with one hand, her fingers pressed against the last words, and endured him as, hating himself, Henry released his anger into her.

Marie-Claire didn't know that, having said goodbye to her in the morning, Henry II often returned to watch from the unused guest room. The mound of books encircled her possessively. Was it his imagination or did they fall from the crates in the shape of a man's limbs, his hat? He felt his palms and neck wet with an inexpressible emotion as he watched her hair brush against the pages. Often she would pause and stroke them, while whispering words he couldn't overhear. Was she quoting or replying? He was tortured by the possibility that there was, indeed, a message. Else why a sequence rather than bulk delivery? But why was he jealous? The man was dead. Still, even the slope of her shoulders was an insult to him. He was tormented by his exclusion. Death had made Henry I that much more dangerous: he couldn't be challenged, nor could the extent of his invasion be measured.

Dull Dr. Drossler was possessed. As he examined other women he studied their faces for signs of betrayal, even entering the dangerous business of seduction himself, to test their guessed at infidelity. He was burning, but he didn't dare take his own temperature or go to a friend for an examination for fear he would be put in hospital; K. would be allowed to usurp him totally. The thought of his wife reading home alone enraged him.

He discovered a new slyness in Spinoza, whose concept of total being suggested an indecent interpenetration of souls. Consider Marie. Were they only words she was absorbing? Then why the high colour, the trembling fingertips, the anticipation as she turned the pages, whispering to herself?

She wept as he threw the Spinoza volume into the fire. In vain she tried to explain to him that in themselves the books weren't at fault. Perhaps he was destroying an essential link in the message from their friend. "The least we can do is let him speak." Seeing his face lit strangely by the leaping fire, she fell silent.

He put her through rigorous cross examination. What had she elicited from the missing pages? He would confiscate the books from her, all of them, for her own good. The object of his jealousy was unclear. Was it Marie or Henry I?

Marie-Claire's flirtatious pleasure, like her initial dread, passed. Now she read with an absorption that seemed to be draining the energies from her shivering body into the books she read. Like a phantom, she scarcely slept or ate. Sometimes a volume would slip from her thin fingers; then she, too, would slip to the floor, and, hurriedly finding her place, would continue to read, though it was hard to believe that her dull eyes registered the print. Her hair had lost its fire. A musty smell permeated the house. She read to discover if he had forgiven them or condemned them.

Henry kept her up long hours without sleep. Gradually his cross examinations would shift from what she read to how she'd felt as she read it, his face contorted as he watched her every response. He would pounce on the slightest reaction or bit of knowledge and use it as proof

that she was being infected by the dead man's madness. He began to mix accusations of Henry I and Henry II, so that she was never sure to which Henry she was justifying herself. Exhausted and ill, she would lapse into a defence to Henry II, only to discover he had turned back into the "other" and was watching her expose herself with malicious pleasure.

He had given up throwing books into the fireplace; chunks ripped from them; armloads of them. Ashes settled like a thin gray pall sheet.

In occasional moments of lucidity, Henry would beg her to forgive him for torturing her. But as he tenderly sponged her dry shrinking body she would watch with horror as the other Henry entered, and his concern turned to sensuality and punishment. She was an object that each Henry possessed for a while in order to torture the other. She knew she had become less important than their battle.

"Poor Marie. I have no choice." He began to weep and stroke her hair for no apparent reason. But even as she cradled him she was unsure who wept, until he made love to her with a violence she recognized. It was a last desperate act of exorcism, thrusting in an attempt to reach her secret centre, or to reach Henry I, or to prove ownership to that Henry; or to satisfy him. The dead man seemed to enter into one and then the other of them, laughing out from behind their eyes, directing their fury — his fury.

It was impossible that she should be closer to the working of that other mind than he. Overcoming his revulsion, Henry discussed the books with her. The curtains were drawn. Marie was always in bed; time no longer existed. She'd complained so often about the heat, then the cold, that he'd finally given up trying to adjust the fire which, in any case, had been choked by books. They lay there still, charred but stubbornly undestroyed, their bindings twisting in on each other.

Impossible that Marie-Claire should be the beneficiary of an abstruse truth denied him, probably intended for him. It had been twenty years since he'd known Kalsinger, but after some trial and error, Henry was able to mentally overcome the intervening years. So alike yet were their natures that gradually he distinguished a pattern in the ever accumulating library.

Pitting his wits against Henry I was like nothing he'd experienced before, but his life had been a preparation for it. Delirious with excitement, he laughed aloud. Not only would he unravel the codices, he would anticipate, thus tapping Henry I's potency.

Marie was barely able to sit up any more so he alone arranged the books in sections: drama, history, philosophy, medicine . . . And so on . . . With gaps that he knew would eventually be filled. He retrieved what he could from the fireplace, then satisfied himself in noting the mutilated sections; he suspected that even they had been predetermined and ventured to guess the authors, the titles, even the pages and lines that would be missing from the volumes to come. To prove his accuracy

he kept a complex catalogue complete with sketches. As the books arrived he would carry them to Marie-Claire, spread them out, then show her book, title, and his neatly printed prophecy. He held them close to her dull eyes, but the bitch refused to give him the satisfaction of a nod. Eventually he cared less about her reaction than his pleasure in the ritual. When excited by a new discovery he would prop her up and lecture endlessly, while she sipped water between parched lips.

Marie had a final flare of energy, soon expended: but during its span they eyed each other like barbaric rivals as each strained over titles and archaic passages. Because they dared not eat, resentful of time lost, their gums pulled back over their teeth. They never left the house now, but called the library to have passages read over the phone, or had books delivered. Not showing themselves, reaching an arm out around the door to accept them.

Each developed a complex logos, smiling at the other's naivete. Then haunted by the possibility that they'd been duped, or that the other may have been right, in hoarse voices they confided interpretations, which, when read aloud, became disjointed and pitiful. Then the two of them howled so that passersby shuddered and hurried home to light conversation and television. Listless, separated from each other by their separate ambition and fatigue, they would sit side by side waiting for the sound of the deliveryman.

Marie's limbs were already cold. They had been for some time. He'd noticed it when, occasionally moving, she would touch him. Her chill permeated the mattress; it coloured his sudden graying stubble. Only an occasional gleam flickering in her opaque eyes reminded him of her presence. Books filled the house now so they could scarcely breathe. Ashes floated from the suffocated hearth.

She wasn't surprised when he killed her, but as his fingers closed impersonally around her throat she asked why he wouldn't wait for the last delivery. He didn't answer her but she knew. He had chosen to preempt Henry I in his timing.

It seemed to him that the light remaining at the base of her eyes slipped from beneath his fingers before he'd exerted any pressure. Where had it gone? Into whose glass of wine? What fireplace?

He understood. The act of vengeance denied the youth, Henry, had been generously bequeathed by him to the other, dearer than dear, closer than brother. This was his legacy. "It was me he loved." And yet, dead first, even now was Marie-Claire being received by Henry I as his bride? Question, then: had he plotted this, too? Had he plotted his initial escape? Had Henry II done nothing of his own volition?

When the last package came, he wasn't surprised that it contained a single volume. Mortality is, after all, one word.

It was the Spinoza, the only book that had been completely destroyed by the fire and the only book to be duplicated. A single gentle line was not cut out, but marked, its place kept by a note.

"Like mine, the essence of your nature is love.

God bless you both.

HENRY."

Henry began to laugh. Perhaps the dry laughter served as a flint or perhaps it was an act of will; he was unable to distinguish which came first, thought or sound, perhaps instantaneous, both familiar, both unheard for some time; a tongue of flame smiled at Henry from the hallway: spontaneous combustion. The fire from Marie's eyes had been transferred.

The skin of his former plump happiness hung on him; he watched with detached pleasure the faltering progress of the flames, one part of him still scientist, curious . . . Which would they choose first . . . the books of philosophy or mathematics . . . or . . . This at least had not been predicted by Henry. The house was tight as a hermetically-sealed cask. The chimney was blocked. Dust and ashes had sifted into the windows and doorways.

A gust of air swept down the chimney and out into the living room scattering paper and ashes. With a sudden twist the drapes, ablaze, danced away from the windows. Who was it watched?—mouths open, the absorbed smiles of aesthetes? The flames roared inside the mausoleum. It was a glorious fire now. Marie-Claire would have loved it. Perhaps she did. Henry walked toward the approaching figure. Another delivery? No, too familiar. Right arm extended, hair aflame, he burst through the wide glass windows, blood and fire mixed, body melting.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CATHERINE ACHOLONU teaches at Alvan Ikoku College in Owerri, Nigeria. Her poetry and scholarly articles have appeared widely in such African journals as *Okike*, *Opon Ifa*, and *Black Orpheus*.

LILLIAN ALLEN was born in Jamaica and, along with Clinton Joseph and Devon Haughton, is a member of the well-known Torontonion performance poetry ensemble *De Dub Poets*.

GEORGE AMABILE has published several collections of poetry, among them, the recent selection *Presence of Fire* (M & S). Former Editor/founder of *Northern Light*, he also teaches in the English Department of the University of Manitoba.

KOFI AWOONOR is Ghana's Ambassador to Brazil and the author of several collections of poetry, two novels, and an important critical survey. He is one of Ghana's most distinguished men of letters and will see his Selected Poems appear later this year with Heinemann.

MIRON BIALOSZEWSKI (b. 1922, d. 1983) is the most original poet to emerge in post-war Poland. A selection of his poems in translation, *The Revolution of Things* (Charioteer, 1974) was published in Washington.

FRED BOOKER lives in Burnaby, B.C. He has had other work recently appear in *Canadian Forum*, *Canadian Dimension*, and *Books In Canada*.

DIONNE BRAND was born in Trinidad and now lives in Toronto. The author of five previous books of poetry, she was recently evacuated from Grenada where she was working for CUSO. *Chronicles Of The Hostile Sun* will shortly appear from Williams-Wallace International.

JOSEPH BRUCHAG has won the 1984 American Book Award for his anthology of Asian American poets, *Breaking Silence*. He taught for three years in West Africa and edits *The Greenfield Review*. *No Telephone To Heaven*, a novel set in Ghana, will appear in the Fall.

SYL CHENEY-COKER was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone and is the author of *Concerto For An Exile* and *Even The Graveyard Has Teeth* (both from Heinemann in the African Writers Series). He is currently working on his third collection.

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE lives in Cherrybrook, Nova Scotia and is the author of *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (Pottersfield Press, 1983). He is active in organizing other Canadian black writers and is presently putting together his second collection.

BOGDAN CZAYKOWSKI & ANDRZEJ BUSZA's book of translations, *Gathering Time: Five Modern Polish Elegies* has just been published by Barbarian Press (Mission, B.C.). Both writers are poets and professors at the University of British Columbia.

CYRIL DABYDEEN is the author of several collections of poetry and short fiction. Originally from Guyana, he now lives and writes in Ottawa, Ontario. His latest collection of poems has just been published by Third Eye.

BERNARD DADIÉ hails from the Ivory Coast. His story originally appeared as part of *Le Pagne Noir*, a collection first published by Presence Africaine in 1955.

DENNIS EGAN had two translations of poems by Gaston Miron in our last issue. He is currently working on a novel and more translations in Montreal, Quebec.

CLAIRE HARRIS lives in Calgary where she teaches and helps edit *Dandelion*. More of her work will appear in *The Penguin Anthology of Caribbean Verse* (1985) and in two collections forthcoming from Fiddlehead Poetry Books and Williams-Wallace International.

ERNEST HEKKANEN's novel, *Chasing After Carnivals*, will appear from General Publishing in the Spring of 1985. His periodical publications are too extensive to list here, but include most Canadian magazines.

TAMBA NIMIMBA KOMBA is a librarian at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Other poems of his recently appeared in the B.B.C. African Writing Competition anthology, *Summer Fires* (Heinemann, 1984).

MARIE LEGROULX is writing a Master's thesis on Gabrielle Roy at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario.

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON teaches English at Carleton University in Ottawa where he also edits *Arc*. He has published four collections to date and recently appeared in *Prism* 22:1.

GERALD LYNCH has been published in many Canadian literary magazines and lives in London, Ontario where he is currently studying for his PhD.

J. O. J. NWACHUKWU-AGBADA teaches Modern African Literature and Creative Writing at Anambra State College of Education in Akwa, Nigeria. He has published one collection of poems and is currently working on another.

TANURE OJAIDE teaches African Literature at the University of Maiduguri in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. He has published a collection of poems and is also working on a second.

OBIBA OPOKU-AGYEMANG was born in Ghana and is the author of *A Flow Like Discord*. He is currently a PhD student at York and lives in Downsview, Ontario. *Cape Coast Castle*, the collection from which these poems have been taken, will appear shortly.

NIYI OSUNDARE teaches in the English Department of the University of Ibadan in Ibadan, Nigeria. His first collection, *Songs of the Marketplace*, has just been published. Two others are in circulation.

YAMBO OUOLOGUEM is the author of *Bound For Violence* (a novel in Heinemann's African Writers Series) and hails from Mali in West Africa. His poems have appeared in many African anthologies and are widely-known for their surreal obliquity and wit.

MARLENE PHILIP was born in Tobago and now practices law in Toronto. Her collections include *Thorns* (1980) and *Salmon Courage* (1984), both from Williams-Wallace International.

EDUARDO BETTENCOURT PINTO was born in Gabela, Angola, lived for a time in Ponta Delgada, the Azores, where he established himself as a poet, novelist, and journalist. He now lives in Burnaby, B.C. He has five books in print to date; two other works are forthcoming in Lisbon.

ROSA BETTENCOURT PINTO, his wife, is assisting Mr. Pinto with his English language acquisition, and has provided the literals in the ongoing translation of his works for his new Canadian audience.

BRENDA RICHES is the Editor of *Grain* and author of *Dry Media* (Turnstone, 1980). Her work has appeared widely in such magazines as *The Capilano Review*, *Event*, and *The Fiddlehead*.

PETER SABOR is an Associate Professor of English at Queens University and formerly taught at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. Another of his Dadié Translations recently appeared in *Jazz and Palm Wine*, an anthology of French West African fiction recently published by Longmans.

BEVERLY SIMONS is a well-known Canadian playwright. Her plays include *Crabdance*, *Preparing*, and *Leela Means To Play*. She has recently turned her hand to fiction and is writing a novel in Vancouver, B.C.

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA (b. 1923) is the leading woman poet in Poland. *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts* (selected translations) was published in 1981 by Princeton University Press.

JULIAN TUWIM (b. 1894, d. 1953) belonged to the inter-war Skamander group of poets in Poland.

FELIX GERARD TCHICAYA U TAM' SI is one of Africa's most prolific and respected poets. He was born in 1931 in Mpili in what is now Congo (Brazzaville). His many books include *Le Mauvais Sang* (1955), *Feu de Brosse* (1957), and *L'Arc Musical* (1970). A Selected in English has recently been published by Heinemann in their African Writers Series.

LAUREL WADE lives in Burnaby, B.C. and is currently a student in English at Simon Fraser University. She has had work recently accepted for *The West Coast Review* and is presently working with Ms. Pinto on the translation of Eduardo Bettencourt Pinto's *Mão Tardia* and other works.

***The Editors wish to apologize for the accidental omission of CHARLES M. TOWNSEND from the roster of contributors to *Prism* 22:3. Mr. Townsend was responsible for the fine translation of Jiri Klobouk's "The Music Teacher" which we excerpted. Mr. Townsend is Chairman of The Slavic Language and Literature Department at Princeton University.



IN THIS ISSUE

A selection of contemporary West African and Canadian Black (émigré) writing . . . and more . . .

Poems by: *George Elliott Clarke, Lillian Allen, Niyi Osundare, Marlene Philip, Brenda Riches. . . .*

Fiction by: *Gerald Lynch, Beverly Simons, Ernest Hekkanen. . . .*

In Translation: *Bernard Dadié, Tchicaya U Tam'Si, Wislawa Szymborska. . . .*

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