

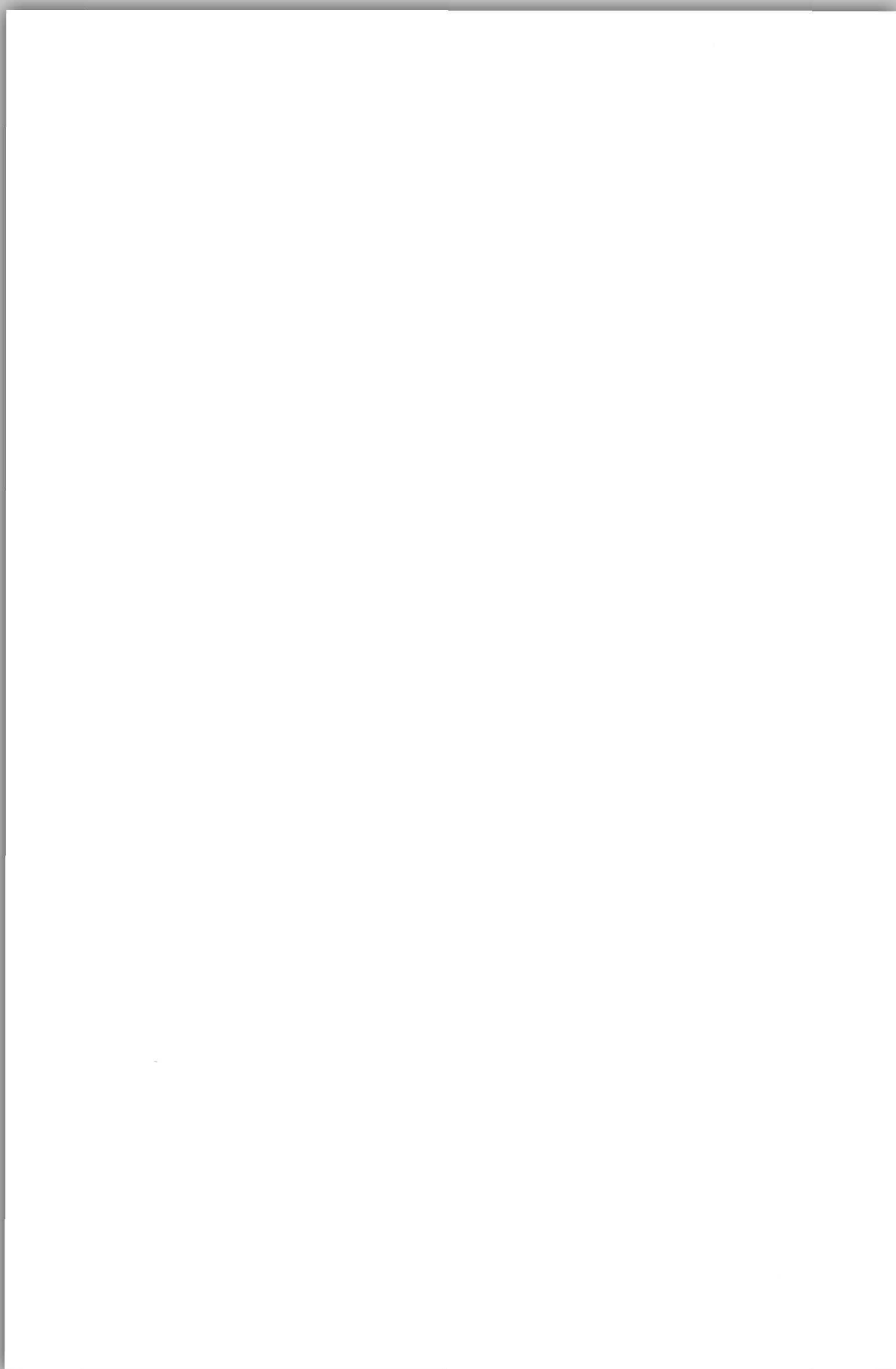
# PRISM *international*

Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world

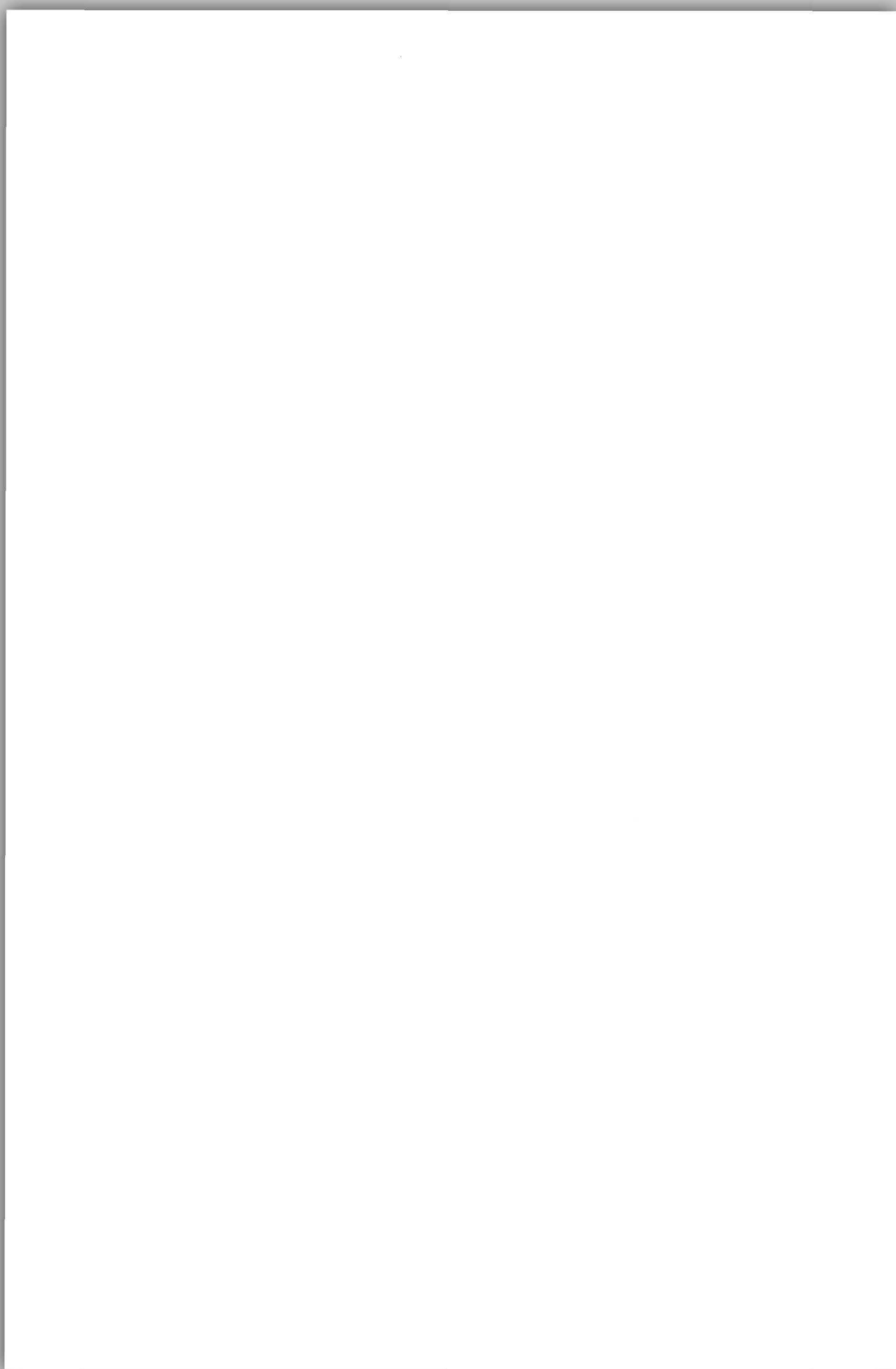
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PRISM *international*  
wishes to congratulate  
Gayla Reid,  
who won a National Magazine Award  
and has been nominated for the \$10,000 Journey Prize  
for her story "Sister Doyle's Men"  
which appeared in  
PRISM *international* Vol. 30, No. 4



# The Usual Accomplishments

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*Cynthia Flood*

Miss Tilly Talbot sat on a flowered loveseat in the lounge of the English residential hotel, *The Times* crisp on her thick grey flannel thighs. To sit next her was to feel small; the elderly Talbot twins were big ladies, and Tilly the bigger. A trifle deaf, she was also the younger of the two—"only five minutes after Milly, mind you!" Milly's eagle nose and humpy back dominated her appearance. Today Tilly wore rose, her sister raspberry.

My father complained. "Where do Englishwomen find these awful sweaters, Rachel?"

"Jumpers, Gerald, do get it right. Milly knits them."

"Awful. Shapeless."

"She's a wonderful knitter," my mother insisted. "And good wool hasn't been available for years, because of the War."

Sometimes the twins spoke in unison. "We were very sad of course when Daddy died," and "I do like a man to smoke a good cigar," and "We do like city life," and "That was after Mummy."

"Formidable," said my father. "The Professor says they work the *Times* crossword without filling in the boxes."

The custom of The Green House reserved the lounge for the Talbot sisters' working of the crossword after breakfast each day. They also used the hotel's copy of *The Times*. Mrs. K, the proprietor, explained to my mother, "I don't begrudge it to the poor old souls. A little fun. They don't get about, at all." She herself, proudly, had neither slept away from the hotel for more than a single night since 1938—fourteen years—nor been home to Ireland since the Abdication. Every morning after the crossword, Mrs. K hoovered, dusted, and tidied the lounge.

Milly now took the newspaper from her sister. Alone on a matching loveseat across the coffee table from Tilly and me, she turned the pages. My head throbbed. Was my fever coming back? Milly and Tilly.

"What are those names short for, Mum?" I'd asked a few days previously, lying in bed.

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She wiped the thermometer on her skirt. "Let me think," squinting. "Millicent? Mildred? You're still running a temp, Amanda."

"How high?" The click of the thermometer case said Canada, home, measles and ginger ale and the shadowy June warmth of my lilac-fragrant room.

"And Tilly—Matilda, I guess. Over a hundred."

"Still?" My head hurt. Without the electric fire, my hotel room would soon be stony cold.

"Milly is the first-born. So—Miss Talbot and Miss Matilda Talbot. Remember, Meg was Miss March?"

*Little Women* was not in the library of my school here in Oxford. Neither was *Anne*. "Milly Tilly Talbot Twins. Funny."

Influenza stretched time thin, like taffy on the buttered marble slab at home, and tore big holes. I'd turn a page of Ransome or Sutcliffe, then realize I'd been in darkness (how long, where travelled?) and now faced improbable words poking coarse white paper. My mother brought Lucozade at noon, was immediately at my door again. "Tea time!" Now Milly and Tilly and I had *The Times* crossword before us: a treat for maybe convalescent me.

Milly read the clues silently. Tilly and I were quiet. Shrouded, the piano straddled the corner of the lounge. *Biscuit* was the colour of the *fitted carpet*, Mrs. K insisted. Not *cookie*.

"We'll begin with the five anagrams."

"What are anagrams, Miss Talbot?"

"Do you really not know the word, Amanda?"

"*Tea*, Amanda," Tilly suggested, "what could those letters turn into?"

"*Ate*?"

And *eat*!" Tilly cried. "Jolly good."

Once Tilly and Milly did not speak for three days because Milly called her sister *a greedy girl*.

"It was about those cream buns at Sunday tea last weekend," my mother reported. "Apparently, when they were little girls at a vicarage tea, Tilly ate too many. Milly reminded her."

"Imagine," my father mused, "pre-Great War cream buns."

"Well of course, Gerald, *years* pre, they were born in 1880. And Tilly's sash came undone when she was exploring the vicarage shrubbery. She stepped on it and it tore."

"Victoria. Gladstone. The Boers. Egypt. Rachel, how many of the people who were at that tea are still alive, do you suppose?"

"Milly had to tie up Tilly's sash."

Tilly was often *just passing through* the lobby as Mrs. K lugged in her string bags of food. "What fine apples! One of your wonderful tarts on

Sunday, Mrs. K?" Or she would *just slip out to the post* as the fishmonger pulled up to the kitchen entrance. "Look, Amanda. Fresh." The had-dock's crazy eye shone.

"I close my eyes for the anagrams, Amanda, so I can move the letters," said Tilly.

"Twenty-one down. *Masters turn to current affairs*," Milly read. "*Turn*, Amanda, implies rearrangement. *Masters*."

Eyes closed: *m*, two *ss*, *a e t* and *r* wobbled like fruit suspended in jellied blood. Current Affairs—at school, Visiting Speakers spoke on those. And once Tilly had told me of Milly's former position as secretary to a retired colonel, "which kept her very much up with current affairs, dear. He was writing his memoirs. She often went up to London. Research. She prepared the index. Much praised." A long warm sigh. "He had served in India for many years. Rajahs, everything. *So* interesting for Milly."

The letters ran about like children playing musical chairs, and sat down. "*Stream. Streams!*"

Milly nodded. "That is correct, *current*. Twenty-three down, *Trots wrongly*. Corrected, *trots* will be—what?"

But I did not know *torts*. When Tilly explained that a wrong was right, my giggling head hurt.

"Now Milly, read our next one!" Tilly enthused.

"Who is leading today, Tilly? I believe I am. *Mutt! hen needs accommodation*, seven."

When their father was dead and the Second World War was over and they were sixty-five, Milly and Tilly put their country cottage up for sale and came to Oxford in search of *accommodation*. In their thick flannel coats-and-skirts (so old the fabric had felted at the jacket corners), in their cotton combies and hairnets and wool and lisle and leather they walked the streets, stepping in unison, toes turned out like hens'.

"*Hutment*," Milly snapped. *Whatever is that?*

Now the sisters lived in this old brick house, not green at all but the colour of raw bacon. Here also were old Mr. and Mrs. Ledington—the Lemurs, my parents and I called them, for their astonished anxious eyes—and old Miss Honey, she of the black dresses with the yokes fringed in winking tinkling jet. (The wind-chimes on the verandah of our Muskoka cottage sounded the same.) And Mrs. Orr and Mrs. Elphinstone. And old Professor McGeachie. In my illness, late at night, I heard him next door, heard him bang his pipe, crumple into his bed, drop his Greek book with the others heaped in the dark. His feet were near my head. And Mr. Fisher the accountant, and red-haired Miss Clyde who taught maths at a girls' school (not mine).



---

"Poor Miss Honey!" Tilly sighed to my parents, as the sisters took tea with us one day. "To be old and alone."

"Poor Professor McGeachie!" Milly corrected. "It is worse for men, Tilly. They are not accustomed to a solitary life."

"But the Professor does not lack for company, does he, Milly? People seek him out, do they not, Milly?"

My father asked later, "Rachel, what was all that about?"

Now Milly cried, "Next, girls! Fourteen Down, *It's choler, maybe, if they don't suit.*" Did *maybe* always signal anagram? Was choler sick or cross? Tilly's "*clothiers*" seemed worthless. My head sang like a saw biting into resinous wood, into summertime.

"Why are all the anagrams *Down* clues?" My voice felt whiny.

"The which, dear? Goody, four clues, we're one-eighth done. Clever girl, to notice that!" said Tilly. "Why, Milly?"

"The mind of each crossword-maker is unique, Amanda. Each man creates differently. This is Torquemada."

Men in offices fitted letters into boxes, made them criss-cross and spell, even made black empty stand symmetrically against full white. The men made up clues. Then we sat in The Green House lounge and tried to think backward through their thoughts: sixteen *Downs*, sixteen *Acrosses*, fifteen squares each way. *If I could only look at the puzzle—but to sit by scary Milly.* . . . Could Tilly and Milly make puzzles? Imagine the sisters in offices like those at my father's publishing company, seated at big desks, their big bottoms cupped in swivel chairs, with tea, sheets of paper, dictionaries, HBs, carbons, typewriters. . . .

"Those old girls in an office?" my father chuckled, later.

"Milly had jobs," I protested.

"She did indeed, Gerald. Secretary, and then companion to Mrs. Brocklehurst, and then chaperone to the Dickinson girls."

"Mum, why did Milly leave home and Tilly stay home?"

"Primogeniture," my father answered. "Milly is the elder. The son, as it were."

When I told my idea to the Talbot sisters, at a shared coffee-time, Tilly giggled. "Us? In an office?"

Milly said then to my father, while Tilly showed my mother her embroidery, "Of course Tilly has no idea of real work, Mr. Ellis. Her life has been very sheltered, I'm afraid."

"Why afraid, Miss Talbot?"

"She always lived at home. First helping Mummy, then looking after Daddy by herself. A country cottage, a small garden."

Now Milly said firmly to Tilly and me, "There is only one more anagram. Four Down: *Regal tour.*"



"Oh the queen, that reminds me!" Tilly cried. "I'll tell, when we've done it." Nine crowned letters sparkled in my red darkness. Ornamental fireworks would spell Elizabeth next year, when the new queen was crowned; last month, the old sick stuttering king had died at last.

"*Regulator*," Tilly and I spoke and laughed. Then, moving with big speed, she took *The Times* and found the front page. "Here. The Aga Khan! 'Because of a slight indisposition' . . . I expect he's had the flu, poor man, just like you, Amanda. . . 'will be unable to attend to correspondence for the next three weeks.'"

"What is an Aga Khan, Miss Tilly?"

"An Eastern potentate," dreamily.

"He is a foreign prince, Amanda, and a very rich man, who has a London residence. Might I continue with our clues, Tilly?"

Tilly and Milly had moved to *the big city*.

My mother snorted. "You can see the quotation marks. Tilly thinks she's talking American."

"Oxford isn't big," I objected. "When we went up Boar's Hill you could see where the buildings start and stop. You can't see the end of Toronto from the Park Plaza."

"Don't tell her that," warned my father.

"And do listen to this," Tilly said, poking at *The Times* so it crackled. "Milly, couldn't this just have been us? '*Woman graduate (28), married, living near London in NW direction seeks post. Some experience journalism, usual accomplishments, wide interests, especially people. . .*' Not that we were graduates, Amanda. Or married, of course. Or journalists. '*Write Box 1636.*'"

"I hardly think we'll need the number, Tilly."

*Her face fell*—I had never seen this. "I was remembering. What it was like. To be at the beginning, Milly."

"We're still at the beginning of this crossword." Milly retrieved the paper and her voice gentled. "Amanda, next come wordplays. They're like puns, rather."

"Oh they're fun!" Tilly cried into Milly's cold smile.

I rubbed my sore head. "It's a job that lady wants, isn't it? What are *usual accomplishments*?"

"Ten Across: *Makes a tremendous impression, but not in the circus.* Two words, five and four letters respectively."

"French, for example. Piano. Dancing," Tilly whispered quickly. "At the circus, Amanda—what animals?"

At home, after Barnum and Bailey's, our cats Tiger and Willow pretended they were panthers, lions, fabled Siberian snow leopards. Blinking, they crouched by the ring I drew in the sunny dirt near the garage,

---

purred, slept. While we lived this English year, they were staying with my uncle in Hamilton. Were they happy? Circus animals. Seals: at the zoo, they danced in the water with their whiskered noses sticking out, the magic nostrils flaring and sealing. In Kipling's story of Kotick, though, sealing was killing, by sealers. In those, my mother preserved fruit. And Miss Trout, our history mistress, who did not approve of modern dancing, spoke reverentially of the Great Seal.

"Well? Did the circus make no impression on you, Amanda?"

The folded melting in my head solidified. "*Great Seal!* Can I write in all the words we've got?"

"No no dear," Tilly said quickly, "here." She held a little pad, where were listed *cream torts hutment clothiers regulator*.

"Amanda," Milly said in her precise voice, "we usen't to do it this way. Earlier, we filled in the words in the puzzle as we went along, did we not, Tilly?"

"The which, Milly? Fill—? Oh yes yes. Such fun, to see the squares filling up! But too easy."

"Much too easy. The shapes of words are revealing."

"You shall write them all on the pad, Amanda, and in *The Times* when we've done."

"Very well. Thirteen Across, *Superfluous to 9 it, though some do*, nine letters."

"How do you *ninesomething*, Miss Talbot?"

"The reference is to Nine Across. *Hoist*."

"A flag. Another way to say that?" Tilly's tone was playful.

"Run up, I guess."

Milly tsked. "*I guess?* Such an odd expression, Amanda. Well? What does one not need to run up, though foolish children do?"

"Milly, you oughtn't to be so peremptory with Amanda."

"Amanda has a good mind, Tilly. She must not be a slacker."

"She isn't well."

"She's quite well enough for a simple clue like this."

My head hurt. "I don't know."

"*Escalator*," Milly snapped, and the nine letters raced up from the Tube's depths. *L* and *t* were tall and thin. Tilly shifted her thick legs. Milly's were as thick. What colour had the sisters' hair been? Iron-grey and ashen. Their ringless hands were large, the nails ridged and bare. They kept their gloves on at the cinema when we went—my mother's idea—to see Alastair Sim's new film *A Christmas Carol*. We sat in this order: my mother, Tilly, me, my father, Milly, Professor McGeachie.

"Never a hint of a husband, I suppose, Rachel?"

"Plain women have a hard time." My mother's voice cut.

"Don't flare up so, Rachel!" An affectionate glance. "That jacket is very becoming."

Now Milly's sigh was impatient. "Eight down: *Not a summer blazer*. Four and three."

On this March morning in the stuffy hotel lounge, my sweater felt thin, stringy.

"*Yule log*," Tilly answered promptly. "Eight done, Amanda!"

"Seven Down: *Pen that sounds like a fleece*. Nine."

"Not a writing pen, Amanda," said Tilly, "easy, *Sheepcote*."

"Eighteen Down: *The hat you eat*."

"*Pork pie!*" Tilly and I shouted into Milly's "Four, three." We laughed and laughed.

"Good work. Fifteen Down: *Paddy's periodical*. Four, five."

"Not the Irish Paddy, Amanda," Tilly warned. "Think of China, Japan."

Rice. Rice. "*Rice paper!*" Lovely feeling when the right answer came! Sunny watery fields, filled with people reading.

*Rap rap* loudly on the swing door—we startled. There was Mrs. K, a cigarette pasted to her lower lip, holding a wicker basket of Vim, wax, oils, rags, brushes, sponge. The Hoover stood behind her.

"I'm off to do my bedrooms, ladies, and then I'll be getting your Ovaltine. Bless you now," and the door swung shut. A whiff of Players lingered.

"Dear Mrs. K! Really, the Irish are so hospitable. She comes in to see us three times every morning, Amanda."

"Tilly, our Ovaltine and Peek Freans are stored in the kitchen. Mrs. K serves them. There is nothing to remark upon. And her knock is needlessly loud. *Bog* Irish, I should say."

The Hoover blundered thumpily up the stairs.

"And she comes *four* times each day. Tilly. Not three."

2.

"Did you know that Isabella Bird went to Japan?" Tilly asked, in the same yearning tone in which she had spoken of the Aga Khan. "Imagine! She even spent time among the Ainu."

"Still wordplays, Tilly."

"The which, dear? Oh, of course."

"My sister is somewhat absent-minded, Amanda." So said Milly, the day when I came to their room as appointed to find Tilly not there, although she had promised to start me on embroidery, which Miss Michaelson at school refused to permit for anyone "so utterly incompetent with her needle" as I.

Milly and Tilly had *twin* beds, ha ha. Milly's was nearer the window,



and on her wardrobe stood photographs: a man like Tilly, a woman like Milly. On Tilly's were small china giraffes. The sisters shared night-table, bookcase, *escritoire*. An embroidery-stand stood on Tilly's side, where a wild crimson dragon writhed within a circular frame; out from his gigantic whorled nostrils, silver steamed.

"Where is St. George, Miss Talbot?"

Milly emitted a laugh. "This dragon is Chinese, Amanda."

"Has Miss Tilly been to China?"

"Don't be silly." She collected herself. "My sister has had the opportunity to read widely, Amanda."

The dragon's scales were smooth as glass.

"You admire my sister's work." Milly shrugged her hump.

"Oh, it's beautiful. It's kind of strange, too."

On Tilly's two walls hung a carving in black wood, a framed oblong of brilliant weaving, a scroll where a waterfall trickled down among plumey trees. On Milly's were watercolours—Ely, Derwentwater (the same view as on my paintbox). Large black-and-white framed photographs showed a formal garden.

"*Kind of?* A Canadianism, I suppose."

Milly closed the door after me and the key turned.

"Come, girls," she said briskly now, "two more wordplays. Nineteen Across: *They are not the runners*. Four, five."

My hurting head had lost the rhythm. Tilly did not speak, but gazed dreamily toward the door.

"Tilly, come back. *Race goes*." Milly took the pad from Tilly, wrote.

"That's *my* job, Milly! Just because you're older. . . ."

When would my mother come back? She had gone to meet an author, to make him understand (again) the distinction between corrections and alterations to proofs. That evening in the lounge, she would act out their conversation. Professor McGeachie and the Misses Talbot (my father said this was the right way to refer to them) would laugh and laugh. Puzzled Miss Honey would smile and the old Lemurs would peer, bright-eyed. *Mummy*. "When I get back, sweetie," she'd said, "we'll play Scrabble, O.K.?"

"And," said Milly, "Twenty-five Across: *No Grand Tour*. Tilly, easy for you. Five, four."

Tilly laughed. "Me? Why, I've never left England! The opportunity never came. Now, Amanda, imagine. Tour: journey?"

"Voyage?" We had *sailed* to England on the *Empress of Canada*, really steamed over green beauty. On maps, oceans were blue.

"Lucky you, on a liner! Trek? That's South African."

"Trip?"



---

"*Cheap trip!*" This must be English.

"Good," said Milly. "The wordplays are accomplished. Now, the straight equivalents."

"Miss Talbot, I thought *accomplishments* were things you'd done, finished. In that ad, what does that lady mean?"

"The usages are nicely distinguished, Amanda. A young person's *accomplishments* are what he is capable of doing, as a result of his education. If using the term of an older person, one would refer to what he had done with his life."

"French, yes," said Tilly, ticking off on her fingers. "Milly's was very useful, wasn't it? With the military at the Colonel's, and with Mrs. Brocklehurst's Continental friends, and with Jocelyn and Josephine Dickinson at Cambridge? Such opportunities to meet people Milly had, Amanda!"

"There remain three straight equivalents," said Milly. "We already have *Hoist*."

"And dancing. Needlework of course. Piano. Piano is always nice, I think. Milly and I loved our piano, didn't we? Duets, Amanda. Such fun! We still know our pieces. But the *Times* crossword man isn't a bit musical, such a pity. And, well, being able to run things. A dinner party. A sale, for the church. Flag Days. Dear Queen Alexandra! That girl might find a post with a charity. Or be a companion. Cards. Card games."

"There are also one or two hiddens," Milly continued. "The answer is fragmented in the clue."

"Cards?" my mother had said to Tilly and Milly. "Sure, let's play cards. What'll it be? Hearts? Canasta? Gin? Bridge? Something Amanda can play too, till her bedtime anyway. Five-card stud? What do you usually play?"

The sisters looked as if my mother had up-ended a cornucopia before them.

"I don't play bridge," Tilly said shyly. "Milly's very good, though," admiringly. "She plays with the Professor and the young people." (She meant Miss Clyde and Mr. Fisher.) "At Cambridge, she often made a fourth. The girls gave her a book of card games, as a farewell. So many solitaires! Really, she is never bored."

My mother got the card-table from Mrs. K and my father went upstairs for port and Lucozade, while I showed Tilly and Milly how to build a card-house. Shortly, we were all playing Continental and drinking out of plastic sherry-glasses. Milly played without hesitation. Tilly dithered and laughed and looked about at us, little eyes alert with pleasure in the soft broad face. She got so confused in the ten and eleven card hands that I became her consultant. "The which, dear?" We laughed, the sisters' cheeks pinked, the port sank.

"Oh, I couldn't, Mr. Ellis, and there's very little left."

---

"There's another bottle upstairs," my father said, tipping steeply into Milly's glass, "and as far as I know the wine-merchant is still in business. So no holding back, ladies."

At our cottage, a few weeks before our sea-voyage to England, we played cards. Aunts and cousins and friends filled cabins, tents, the boat-house, and as many people stood around the long table to watch the after-dinner poker game as were actually playing it. Teasing, unwanted advice, decrepit family jokes—the cottage was lamplit noise on the edge of dark water. Later, in my warm Flit-smelling tent, above the soft breaths of a baby cousin beside me, I heard continuing adult amusement, and later still heard the howl of the CPR's Transcontinental at the distant foot of the lake, en route for MacTier and Parry Sound and the midnight stop at Sudbury. Here in The Green House, only winter rain sounded as I settled in bed to read Alison Uttley. Now in March, our cottage too would be silent, in snow. Breaking ice, shifting docks were weeks away.

"The direct equivalents are *Across* clues," said Milly. "Twelve, *put out*, five. Sixteen, *lisping song*, five."

*Thong* came giggling right into my cold hurting head. "The list looks like a secret language," I said, adding my word.

"The which, dear? Oh yes." Tilly laughed. "Now Twelve. Half-done! Amanda, do you know about the silly sleepy man who wound up the cat and *put out* the clock?" I did, but Tilly did not know why the moron threw the clock out of the window. We laughed more, Milly frowned, Tilly hurriedly said, "*Expel*."

"Really, girls. Pay attention." Milly pursed her lips as if tasting bitterness.

Did I need to *swallow a bitter pill*? In strange England, pills were at a place called *Boots*, and so were books. There I met Tilly. After a morning with the Mothers' Union, she was purchasing cornplasters, while I was once again borrowing *The Far Distant Oxus* and *Swallowdale*. We walked back to the hotel, our home.

"I'm not very good at this," she said, her breathing laboured, "and my sister doesn't walk at all, for fear of falling. Her brittle bones." In her loose raincoat, Tilly resembled a limping tent.

"Miss Tilly, did you read Ransome when you were young?"

"The which, dear? Oh no, I'm far too old," Tilly answered comfortably. "But I know why he is so popular. Reading about adventures—why, I've done that all my life."

We stood at a zebra crossing. These were new to Oxford; people wrote to the newspaper, for and against. Milly and my father followed this debate. One of her letters had been printed.

"Amanda, think how surprised a zebra would be, to be here!" We

crossed the Woodstock Road safely. "I used to read to Daddy, you see," she continued, "because Mummy had always read to him. Of course I couldn't do as well, but with the eye-strain Daddy couldn't. . . . And so when he retired, he was accustomed. . . ."

"What was your father's job?"

"The which, dear? His—? Why, he was a headmaster. A boys' prep school, small, but good, oh good. Daddy was well-respected, I believe. Our cottage was nearby. I'm afraid Milly found it small and shady, after Mrs. Brocklehurst's. Daddy and I. Twenty-three years, after Mummy, till his retirement. And then another twenty-three! Wonderful how he lasted. So frail always. Very deaf, latterly. After breakfast I'd settle him in his study, and read till he dozed off. And after his afternoon nap. And sometimes after dinner, although he did like the wireless."

"What did you read to him?" We passed old houses with dark dank gardens, not *front yards*, edged in towering laurel. Rain slid off the leafy slickness. Might a zebra peer out from the glistening foliage, peer with pale blue excited eyes?

"Trollope," promptly. "Sometimes I felt I knew Barsetshire better than Oxfordshire. Wasn't I a silly? We read the *Chronicles* eleven times."

"Did you like those books?"

"I love Mary Kingsley," said Tilly, twirling her umbrella like a big black flower. "Of all the lady explorers, the very best writer. *Travels in West Africa*—the first time—never forget. In the garden—wallflowers so fragrant—peas shelled for dinner—a little time." She stopped by a scarlet pillar-box and waved her free hand as if conducting. "Listen. 'When we got into the cool forest beyond it was delightful; particularly if it happened to be one of those lovely stretches of forest, gloomy down below, but giving hints that far away above us was a world of bloom and scent and beauty which we saw as much of as earthworms in a flower bed.'" Tilly's eyes gleamed. "Fancy, Amanda. Then I heard Daddy calling." She resumed her uneven trudge.

"Did your father like Mary Kingsley? I never knew there were lady explorers. Like Drake and Raleigh?"

"The which, dear? Harriet Martineau, of course," Tilly enthused, "America and the East, though so opinionated. Lady Ann Blunt, Syria and Saudi Arabia and Egypt. What a life! Such a nice man! And she was a good writer too, though not like Mary. And Lady Hester Stanhope. I am not sure that all was well with her mind, Amanda. The Lebanon. But what descriptions! The people she met! And Isabella Bird went simply everywhere. To every mountain. Cold, but such courage. I stayed up hours, every night, reading. Alexandra David-Neel. Alexine Tinne. . . ." She sighed.



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"Wouldn't you like to travel yourself, Miss Tilly?"

*Expel thong run up:* our list of finished clues was lengthening. Above us, the distant hoover growled.

"What's next, Miss Talbot?"

Milly stared at the crossword. "Tilly," she said, "there may be a difficulty."

Tilly's thigh stiffened. "Where, Milly?" softly. Her right hand patted the list—*There there*.

"Seventeen Across. *Van of the broom display*, five. I'm not receiving anything, Tilly," in a thin urgent tone.

"Milly dear, you know that sometimes happens." Her twin's voice was slow, incantatory. "Sometimes. And now we'll simply. Go on with our work. And in due time. Seventeen Across. Will come." Tilly's gaze reached her sister, humped over the *Times*. "We'll go on now, Milly. Tell us, Milly. What's next?"

"Why, only two hiddens, and then the literary and historical references." Milly sat up, blinked her dark blue eyes. Tilly's leg relaxed. "Twenty-seven Across, *Result from having eaten suet-pudding*, five. Amanda, join the end of each word with the beginning of the next. Does any combination mean *result*?"

*Ultfr, omhav, ingea. "Ensue!"*

"Now Twenty-eight Across. First synonyms for two words, then the same technique. *Material insects that are striped*. Nine."

"Insects, Amanda," Tilly invited.

"Spiders? Beetles? Flies? Butterflies? Dragonflies? Ants?"

"Ants." Her voice was warm with pleasure.

"Silk ants? Satin ants? Cotton ants? Wool? Linen? Silly."

"Think, Amanda! Don't shirk it."

"*Serge!*" Tilly burst out, and wrote *Sergeants* on my list.

"Are sergeants striped, then?"

"The which, dear? Why, of course they are."

"She wouldn't know, Tilly. The colonies didn't really go through the War." Milly's appraising eyes reverted to the clues.

"What does she mean, *not receiving anything*?" I whispered.

"Oh." Tilly's pale blue eyes looked inward. "Amanda, when a mistress at school asks you a question, and you can't answer, but you feel the answer's in your mind?" I had not known that anyone else felt this. "For Seventeen Across, Milly does not know that she knows."

Footsteps sounded down the staircase.

"Colonials do not understand the War, either," Milly added.

"Dieppe. Lots of Canadians were there." The French town issued cold and angry from my mouth, unfamiliar—I had only read and heard the word. Very young, I came upon my mother crying over a newspaper; I



ran to our back yard, hid in the earthy dark under the mock-orange. Later, my dry-eyed mother called me for lunch (baked custard), and insisted to my father, "Slaughter, Gerald. Butchery of children." Dieppe. Chill pain seeped down my spine. Mummy would hold me. We would play Scrabble.

Mrs. K's footsteps went smartly across the parquet of the lobby and on to the stone flags of the hotel kitchen. *Wouldn't you like to travel, Tilly?*

"My sister Milly concentrates and is very precise," Tilly explained to my mother. Out of a canvas bag on Tilly's lap, layers of crisp white paper unpleated, and from this emerged altar cloth; Tilly was a surgeon at work on a small exposed section of sacred tissue. From the point of her needle, *IHS* grew to glossy fullness. "When she came home for visits, she wanted to cook. I'm afraid I always let her."

"Why afraid?"

"And Milly would insist on using recipes. No substitutions! Impossible in war-time, of course. I simply cooked what Daddy liked, or what was in the garden. And after Milly left each time, when I first made a favourite of ours, rice pudding perhaps, he would say, '*That's the way.*'" Tilly's smile was fond. The embroidery silk dove like a snake into its hole.

"Look, Amanda," my mother said. On the nether side of Tilly's work, *IHS* was exquisitely smooth.

"Milly so much admired the way the kitchen was run, in Mrs. Brocklehurst's great house."

"Perhaps your sister would have liked to run a kitchen?"

"Oh Mrs. Ellis, who could *want* to? Boiled eggs just right. Shepherd's pie every single Tuesday. The fish—fresh *so* hard to come by. And he couldn't understand rationing. So cross." Tilly rethreaded her needle. "And never a break. Do you know, the headmaster after Daddy never invited us back? Not once. In very little time, the whole tone of the school changed, we felt."

Milly sighed now. "Time, Tilly! We've only done nineteen clues." The big twin's face sagged. Milly smiled. "Our rule is to have two-thirds done, Amanda, before our Ovaltine."

*Rap rap*, and Mrs. K burst in again. This time she carried a large tin of Peek Freans, a bottle of lemon oil, and a chamois cloth. She set all before us and smiled at me, quirking her black eyebrows.

"Enjoying yourself, are you? Off to do my lavs and baths now. Kettle's on." She was gone again.

"Really! That woman. So familiar."

"This is her home, Milly. We are paying guests. And she only comes *three* times."

"Tilly, do you wish to drink tepid Ovaltine this morning?"

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Tilly folded her hands.

"Good. Now. One Across. *Risky to hoax a sea-captain*, nine."

"What is two-thirds of thirty-two, Miss Talbot?"

Milly stared silently at her sister.

"Milly only allows *me* fifteen seconds," Tilly then said loudly, "for the literary and historicals. *Milly* knows them all already. Except Seventeen Across. *Milly* doesn't know that."

"*Foolhardy*." Milly's tone was confident. "Amanda, do you know the painting of the death of Nelson? *Four* times, Tilly. She comes when we've finished. Amanda, kiss me Hardy?"

No. No clue. My skin shivered, like lake water at dusk after a windless day. Mrs. K's smoke lingered, queasily.

3.

"Miss Talbot," said my father, "what was the nature of your work for the Colonel?"

"I performed the usual secretarial duties, Mr. Ellis."

Milly and my father discussed the Colonel all through the Sunday joint and the treacle tart, while my mother and I showed Tilly my uncle's letter and the affecting photo he'd sent of Willow and Tiger curled up in a hammock on his back verandah.

"The old boy sounds a bit of a tyrant," my father reported that evening. In my dressing-down, I sat wet-haired on my parents' bed, wearing a towel-turban. "Made her retype a page if he so much as changed *and* to *so*."

"Afraid to finish the book perhaps." My mother unwrapped the towel and felt my hair.

"Damn thing wouldn't have seen print without her. Miss T doesn't say that, mind you."

"I'd like to read it." My mother combed softly. I winced.

"Probably the standard *My Twenty Years in Poona*."

"Seventeen years she spent with him."

"Like a fairytale." I was sleepy.

"That," my father corrected, "it was not." He took off his tie and emptied his pockets, chinking coins and keys into the containers on his dresser.

My mother combed smoothly through the last tangle. "Years and years with Mrs. Brocklehurst. Years with the Dickinsons."

"Miss Talbot says he *hadn't a strong strategic sense*." My father examined his image. "Remarkable comment for a woman."

"Tilly told me she went to visit Milly at the Colonel's once." I yawned. "She took five buses. One after another, the whole day long. To the sea. At Torquay. She'd never seen it."

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"Years." My mother's pat on my head was final.

The photographs in *Miss Talbot's book* showed the Colonel on or near various animals, and with personages in unusual clothing. My parents skimmed the text, my father humphing about "great empire and little minds," and examined the index. Tucked inside the dust-jacket was a yellowed clipping.

"The reviewer dined well before writing that, Rachel."

"Not the last paragraph," my mother said. "Listen, Amanda. 'Mention must finally be made of the admirable index prepared by Miss Millicent Talbot. Detailed and accurate, it is the more noticeable within the context of the volume's general quality.'"

"What does that mean, Mum?"

"The book's punk but the index isn't."

"High praise, from *TLS*," my father congratulated Milly.

Milly's dark blue eyes looked for hiding. "I did not know that my sister had pasted the review in there," she said, wringing her hands, huddling down. "I did not know, Mr. Ellis."

Tilly explained, when she had escorted Milly upstairs, "My sister is very shy, Mrs. Ellis. It seems the wrong way about, doesn't it? So hard for her, to meet all those people! And I never went anywhere."

"And you went from the Colonel to Mrs. Brocklehurst?" my father asked Milly next Sunday tea-time, gently; Tilly was showing my mother her stitches for the lily-stamens.

The lines around Milly's mouth loosened. "To the garden."

"Miss Tilly and your father—had they a garden, too?"

"Of a kind." Milly's voice sharpened. "Small, though Tilly's complaints would make one think it was Sissinghurst. Shady." She sat up straight. "But so much might have been done with that garden, Mr. Ellis! She didn't care. Sometimes I lose patience with her. Sometimes I think everything was the wrong way about."

Now Mrs. K's footsteps clacked over the parquet again. Going upstairs, she called impatiently to the maids.

"Milly, another literary and historical, please," meekly.

Milly smiled. "Three down. *A pilgrim by name*, seven. Do you know the *Progress*, Amanda?" At home, my teachers wrote *Good progress* on my report. How would I fare at this English school? *Don't worry*, my parents said, meaning well.

Wiggling her fingers, Tilly counted. "Christian nine, Faithful eight, Evangelist, Worldly-Wiseman, no no no. Of course, *Hopeful*. Always be so, Amanda!" I wrote the word. "That's why I liked that advert, Milly. That hopeful girl. She's wondering what there is for her in the world."

No sense to me, no clue. What were my accomplishments? Some French. No piano. Would Latin count? No dancing. Could I run anything?



Writing letters, yes; secretaries do that. *I could too* do things. *I would* do them. Word-games—yes. What had these two accomplished? *Wouldn't you like to travel, Tilly?*

"Really, Milly, come to think of it, there are very few women in *Pilgrim's Progress*."

"Really, Tilly! Bunyan describes the travels of a soul. Its sex is surely irrelevant? And as for hopeful—plain silly, I'd call that girl. She can't be making much of a wife."

"I suppose you would know."

"And what do you mean by that, Tilly?"

"Very clever, the way you sat next to him at the cinema."

"And what about all your *hopefuls* in the old days, Tilly? Every term, it seemed, you wrote me about some new master."

"Those explorers kept me hopeful, Amanda," Tilly had said, as she and I ended our journey in the forecourt of The Green House. "Those brave ladies, travelling so far!" Snowdrops bloomed by the doorstep. "Tiresome little things," and she shook her umbrella at them. As we entered, she assumed a quoting expression. "Listen, Amanda. 'Here and there the ground was strewn with great cast blossoms, thick, wax-like, glorious cups of orange and crimson and pure white, each one of which was in itself a handful, and which told us that some of the trees around us were showing a glory of colour to heaven alone.'" Tilly fitted her umbrella into the stand and clapped her hands. "Glorious cups! Each one a handful!"

The lobby smelled of soup. Tilly limped to the oak settle and sat heavily down to rub her ankles. "Daddy and I gave a dinner for every new master. And his wife of course, if he had one. Fancy, Amanda: me opposite Daddy, in my best dress! Only a few were married when they arrived. All those weddings in the school chapel!" Her big feet were boxed in black laced shoes. Thick cocoa lisle was visible to mid-calf, followed by the rumpled wool of a hand-knitted suit with wide horizontal corrugations. Milly's was olive, Tilly's celery. "Milly always says I had such opportunities to meet people."

*Wool next to the skin.* My sweater chafed my wrists.

"I see you knit in the European way," my mother had said admiringly to Milly, watching her needles exude smooth fabric.

"We had a German governess for a time, Mrs. Ellis," Milly replied. "The Germans were not then the enemy. I make clothing," she added. "My sister's work is decorative."

"My God those skirts are awful," my father expostulated, at dinner. "Broad-beamed women shouldn't be allowed to wear things like that. Don't they know how they look from behind?"

"Milly couldn't find proper skirt lining, Gerald," my mother remon-



strated. "There still isn't much in the shops, you know. Amanda, don't eat too many potatoes. What I wouldn't give to get those two into decent girdles!"

Tilly had retied her shoe laces and sniffed. "Mrs. K's potato soup. All those dinners I cooked, Amanda! All those men, saying the same things. I laughed." Mischief tightened Tilly's wrinkles. "Oh, not aloud. But I used to fancy—what Harriet and Isabella and Mary and Ann could tell, if they were at table! Jungle dinner. Desert dinner. Dinner at Gondokoro, dinner on the bounding main." She heaved to her feet. "I must tell Milly I'm home. She worries."

"Tilly," Milly said now, "if you simply sit and giggle with Amanda, we shall never have our Ovaltine. We shall never finish this crossword. And you know my worry about Seventeen Across, Tilly. You know."

"Yes, Milly. What's next?"

"Twenty-six Across. *Novel sign-post reader?* Five letters. *Diana*, of course."

Tilly blinked. "Diana?"

"*Of the Crossways*. Meredith. Next, Seventeen Down."

"Wasn't that Mrs. Brocklehurst's name, Milly dear?"

"Meredith? No, Diana."

"I meant Diana."

"You weren't plain, Tilly. So often you are not plain."

"I knew it was Diana," Tilly said with satisfaction. "Why didn't you let us try, Milly? That wasn't fair to Amanda and me." Old cold fingers patted my sweaty hand.

My mother was also good at word-games. Accomplished. We would play, when she came back. "Maybe the Talbots would like to play Scrabble with us, Amanda? You ask them, this morning."

"Diana," Milly had explained to my father, proprietorially, "Diana Brocklehurst, although to use her Christian name was quite a mark of distinction. Very few people. . . ."

"Not including Milly, of course," my mother said in exasperation to my father and me, as we drove out to Burford for tea at Huffkins'. "What a country. Years and years, *Yes Mrs. Brocklehurst No Mrs. Brocklehurst Milly do this Milly do that*."

"What did *she* do?"

"What did the great Mrs. B do? She had money."

"She was a lady, Rachel," my father protested. "That's an accomplishment."

"Gerald! You are too much in love with England. She had money. That's *all*. Well—she made a beautiful garden," my mother conceded, exiting smartly (my father closed his eyes) from the roundabout at the city's

north end; she had quickly adapted to a right-hand drive. "She and her gardeners. Never lifted a spade herself, mind you. But beautiful, yes. You've seen the photos."

A waterfall, lawns, terraces, a wall swaying with roses, vistas over-arched by ancient trees. . . . In Mrs. Brocklehurst's flowerbeds, plantings were tiered like the bleachers at Varsity Stadium back home. Back home grew no fields like those we now passed in our Morris Minor, fields like the thousand patches of green silk in Dorothy's homeward-bound balloon.

"Did Milly lift a spade, Mum?"

"Oh yes. Mrs. B thought her touch essential for the roses. *And* the bulbs. *And* the pruning."

"Milly was a valuable assistant, then," my father said.

"More, Gerald," my mother insisted. "Look, Amanda, in that field—lamb." The pale green country flowed past as if the car were a stone in a river. "Over the winters, Milly prepared scale drawings of the garden. With tissue-paper overlays."

"Strategic planning."

"She's kept some, along with Mrs. B's obituary. All labelled. Elevations, layouts. Look, there's a black lamb, jumping! The Italian garden from the east. Sequences of tulips that lasted months."

Was that *an accomplishment*, to make a garden? Tilly hadn't even done that. The garden wasn't Milly's, though.

"But it wasn't her garden," my father said.

"No. These houses! Wonderful, the Cotswold stone." An unremarkable greyish-yellow. "Mrs. B's house was huge."

"Tilly told me that Mrs. Brocklehurst sent a Rolls Royce to meet her at the station, the time she went to visit Milly. It had little flower vases stuck up by the windows, inside. Fresh flowers every day. The chauffeur said so."

"Other people's houses, other people's lives."

"Rachel, what were those girls called whom Milly chaperoned? Jilly and Janie? Jessie and Jenny?"

"Daddy, can't you ever remember names? Jocelyn. Josephine."

The hill of Burford High Street fell away before us. Vigorous pollarding had been performed on all the trees.

"Dreadful," my father lamented. "Wretched deformations."

"Only gardeners understand pruning." My mother parked.

Huffkins' Sunday tea was clotted cream and cottage loaf and butter and homemade jam and crumpets and honey from happy Huffkin bees and large striped cups filled with hot dark brown.

"Delicious damson," said my mother, "as good as mine."

"Delicious," my father responded, taking another crumpet. "There's nothing like this in Canada."

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"Dreadful," Tilly exclaimed, when we told of our outing. "Those poor trees, Mrs. Ellis. Murdered for those silly electricity wires. Was the jam damson or strawberry?"

Later, Milly's laugh was dry. "You heard, Mr. Ellis? From murder to jam. One cannot reason with Tilly. To her, fact means little. In fact, her so-called *brave ladies* all had independent means. Or no responsibilities. Or odd husbands. Or even all three. Such opportunities they had! No. To Tilly, brave ladies." Her voice desiccated even the *I*. She turned her back.

"Why does Milly have a hump, Mum?"

"Osteoporosis. From the Greek." My father explained.

4.

"Tilly and Amanda, do you not hear Mrs. K coming downstairs? Clumping, rather? We have very little time. Seventeen Down is surely easy. *What Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie drew*, seven."

"Treacle!" We spoke in unison.

"Dodgson had a Tilly too." Tilly sounded proud. "The other kind, *ie*. Tillie at the tiller. Of course she wasn't like me." She shifted her bulk on the loveseat. "Have you seen his photos of the Liddell girls, Amanda?"

Not a clue.

"Three more before Ovaltine," Milly said.

"Slender pretty little things." Tilly vaguely scanned our list of words. "Even some snaps of them without their undies on. Why ever would he want to do that?"

"It is a work of fancy, Tilly. Those girls were fortunate to have the attentions of a well-known author. Otherwise, why would anyone remember them? Twenty-three Across, *One pre-eminent in woodcuts*, three, six. This is not literary."

I counted what felt like fifteen seconds, counted again.

Tilly's lower lip puffed out. "Why are you mixing them up, Milly?"

"Keep you light on your toes, Tilly." Milly's eyes gleamed.

"It isn't *fair*. You've broken the order, Milly." Tilly's voice slid up the scale. "You're never fair, Milly, never."

"Really, Tilly!"

"And *keep on your toes*—you mean I'm *fat*, Milly, I know you. You meanie, Milly!" Tears dropped. "Fancy. *Fancy*. Wishful thinking, I call it. Your Professor. You want to leave me here to die alone. You talk to him softly so I can't hear, but I know. But he'll never ask you, Milly, never never never!" in a shout.

"Really, Tilly! No one is dying. Not before the child."

"What is the word, Miss Talbot?" I cried. Milly glared.

"*Top Sawyer*."



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"You said not literary, Milly!"

"Not *Tom*, Tilly. *Top*."

Mark Twain wasn't in my school library here either.

Milly sighed. "Amanda, the Professor and I occasionally enjoy *The Observer* crossword. He is an amusing person. Have you seen him blow smoke-rings and wiggle his cigar inside them? Twenty-two Across now. You aren't at your best this morning, Tilly. *Biblical queen's anaesthetic*, five."

"It's my turn tomorrow, Milly. You'll be sorry." *They do this every day*. The kitchen door slammed. "And Milly, the fourth time that Mrs. K comes *doesn't* count. We've finished then."

"*Ether*," Milly said, *ethaw*, her chin up, looking at us: fat old twin and feverish four-eyes. Mean hateful Milly.

"Ether?"

"Think it through, Amanda. Surely you know the story of Esther, King Ahasuerus' queen? Very well. Then, *anaesthetic*. *Ether* is common. And the word is Esther the queen with her s, as suggested by *an*, Greek without, and *aes*. Thus, *ether*."

Greek: an accomplishment? Sixth Form girls studied that code, which old Professor McGeachie read as easily as English. Footsteps clacked on the parquet.

"It is necessary to follow the logic of the associations," Milly continued. "Professor McGeachie says—"

With her back, Mrs. K pushed open the lounge door. She carried a tray of steaming cups.

"The Professor and his Greek," said Mrs. K. "Poor old soul."

"Lovely Ovaltine!" Tilly cried, clapping her hands. "Lovely biscuits!" Soft hateful Tilly.

"Thank you, Mrs. K." Milly's tone was icily dismissive. Mrs. K did a slow circuit of the room, picking up copies of *Punch* and *The Countryman* and setting them in right-angled piles.

"Just making a start, ladies. You'll let me know when your little puzzle's done?"

"Intolerable!" cried Milly as the door swung shut. "To think that that superstitious Irish peasant owns this hotel! No, Tilly, you may not open the Peek Freans yet. One more, one more! Amanda, you have visited St. Paul's? Two Down, *O Sir Christopher is possessive*. Five."

The Ovaltine smelled unpleasant. *Ether* anger trickled on to my tongue. "*Owner*. That's really an anagram, Miss Talbot." I wrote it down and counted. "You said two-thirds, Miss Talbot, but we've done more than three-quarters."

"I may have lost count."

"Peek Freans! My sister often does that when she's leading, Amanda.



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Don't be cross, dear, do choose." Tilly held out the tin.

My father and I always ate the Swiss Mochas right away, and then more slowly the Fruit Cremes and the Sandwiches. Then came the sparkly Nice Biscuits; the Digestives, coated preferable to plain; finally the Arrowroots and my father's complaints, until my mother said, "Really you are a child, Gerald. Open the new tin, for heaven's sake." He laughed, I pried off the lid, my mother ate remnants.

"How many can I have?"

"*May* I."

"The which, dear? What a sensible question. At your age, I always wanted to know. *She* said it wasn't proper." Tilly glared. "We take three, Amanda. A plain and a not-so-plain and a fancy."

The sweet cardboardy paste of Arrowroot filled my mouth. A skin was forming on my Ovaltine.

"Mummy would say *May* I too, Tilly."

"Gracious, you're eating your plain first, Amanda! I'm afraid I love my choc. Daddy always gave me his." Tilly bit largely into a Swiss Mocha. "The which, Milly dear?"

"Mummy would say the same, Tilly," in a pleading tone.

Tilly's hand subsided into her lap. "Dearest Mummy," the sisters sighed.

5.

"What happened to their mother, Mrs. K?" my mother asked once. "Do you know that story?"

The three of us were pushing furniture about in my parents' room; Mrs. K had brought up yet another bookcase for them. Her feather duster flicked over the shelves while ash dropped from her cigarette.

"The change."

"Women don't *die* of menopause, Mrs. K."

"It came on her young."

"But to *die*, Mrs. K?"

"What is the change?" I enquired. Mrs. K and my mother looked at me and at each other.

"Growths, there were," Mrs. K offered. She pushed, my mother and I pulled. "There. Perfect. Now you're right."

"Cancer, then?"

"That's not a word I'll speak, Mrs. Ellis."

"You can start now, Amanda. Reference books on that shelf."

Mrs. K inhaled. "Hard for a woman at the best of times. Not that you'd know yet, I expect?" My mother shook her head. "Miss Talbot now," and Mrs. K exhaled, "she had to leave her post with that Mrs. Brock-lehurst and come home, because Miss Tilly was took so bad with it."

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"Mum, what is the change?"

"I'll leave you to it," Mrs. K said. "Mr. Ellis'll be pleased with his book-case, I hope."

"Thank you, Mrs. K. Now, Amanda. . . ."

"Now Amanda," said Milly, crisp and precise once more, "just while we're having our break, shall we finish up the *Downs*?"

"Then it wouldn't be a break, Miss Talbot. Would it, Miss Tilly?" We split open our Creme Sandwich Fingers.

"Up the *Downs*," Tilly giggled, as we peeled off the filling in strips like yellow band-aids. The pad of Tilly's forefinger was yellow with callus.

"Some never get accustomed to a thimble," she had explained to my puzzled mother, "and I'm one. It held my hand *in*, somehow. My only difficulty was during the change. I perspired so, Mrs. Ellis!" She took another stitch in the flower.

"You had a hard time with the change?"

How could a smile be sad? "The hardest part of mine, Mrs. Ellis, was Milly's. She had to leave her post with Mrs. Brocklehurst, to come home so I could care for her."

"How long?"

"Five years." Tilly's stitching brought the silvery-white petals up into three dimensions, so their vigour swelled above the fabric. "Then she took up her post with the Dickinson girls, and went to Cambridge."

"Five years for you to care for her *and* Mr. Talbot?"

"Oh, Daddy was happy to have her home." Perhaps the sadness stood in her pale blue eyes. "He was so proud of her. Milly *would* have a pond in the garden—but the space simply wasn't there. And the expense! So—an elegant birdbath. Milly's design. Such trouble to keep the cats away! And then that wonderful opportunity"—Tilly's voice brightened—"to live amidst all that learning. My sister is very intelligent, Mrs. Ellis."

"So are you."

"Oh my goodness, Mrs. Ellis, I'm the one who stayed home."

Now Tilly rolled up her creme filling into a squat log and ate it in one bite. "Delicious! Shall we?"

"If you two are *quite* ready, it's Twenty-four Down: *Wish for an annual letter*. Five." Milly's tone said that the answer sat ready on her tongue. Swallowing sweetness, I closed my eyes.

"To wish for," Tilly said longingly.

"Or consider the reference of *annual*." The sisters' voices melted, like warm maple syrup scrolling queasily over snow.

"*Yearn*."

"Good girl." Tilly took the pad from me and pencilled. "Another, quick while we're doing so well!" No. No more food.

"One down. *Musician's large reward*. Seven."

---

"Why, *fortune*." Mean Tilly did not even wait for me to try.

Nasty sweetness coated my teeth. "I thought *fort* in French meant *strong*."

"*Substantial*. Those nuances come later, Amanda, in the study of any language." Mean Milly. My minimal accomplishments.

To face both sisters, I leaned away from Tilly. My tummy tilted. *I want Mummy*. "What are your accomplishments?"

"The which, dear? Oh, hardly anything, I should suppose." Tilly chuckled, as if to ensure joking. "I kept Daddy happy."

"The *Downs* are not yet done," Milly reproved. "Twenty Down, *Not the same as an E, however*, seven. Amanda?"

"Lonely? Sickly? That kind of y?"

"No no, seven letters. And *e*. Not *y*." Milly.

"Repartee, Amanda. Like that." Tilly.

"Toffee?"

"*Seven* letters . . . but well tried, Amanda." Milly's tone was surprised. "You know *toff*? You're warm."

What Milly said, what she asked—deep in my head sounded an infinitesimal answering call. I was warm. The word was starting to move towards my mouth. How to help? How to meet the gathered coming letters, so we could speed out and speak? My eyes closed. Now I was all over chill. Toffee in the wet mouth: distasteful.

"Yes, look at the dark," Tilly urged.

"Think, Amanda."

"Think of it! Milly in Cambridge," Tilly had continued, as my mother and I watched the golden stamens growing. "Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson thought it unsuitable for their girls to be alone there, especially with Jocelyn's mathematics; not one other girl read maths in her year. So Milly was their companion. Charming rooms they had. I visited once. Oh, the train!"

One lily stem curved down to twine with another.

"What did Josephine take at college?" I asked.

"*Take*? Oh. She read classics. Milly had schoolgirl Latin and could help. She learned so much herself! Some Greek, imagine."

"Why didn't you and Miss Talbot go to college yourselves?"

My mother fidgeted.

"The which, dear? Us? Oh no." Tilly adjusted the fabric on her lap. "By that time Mummy wasn't very well, and university wasn't quite . . . it wasn't thought necessary. For girls. The expense. Then Mummy died. And we couldn't leave Daddy."

"But Milly left, Miss Tilly." Smiling deafly, she began a duplicate lily. My mother's elbow was sharp in my side.

Lily. Exactly. *Blankee*. Like a toff. A toff showed off, was spiffy and



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smart. And *grand*. “*Grandee! Grandee!*” I stood up and showered Peak Frean crumbs. The gristle went out of my knees like dead elastic.

Milly smiled and Tilly laughed.

“Tilly laughs a lot,” my mother said to my father. “But Gerald, Amanda and I watched her sew, this afternoon. The same damn beautiful lily, stem, leaves. Lily, stem, leaves.”

“At least she has come social life. Her Mothers’ Party.”

“Mothers’ *Union*, Gerald, do get it right.”

“Tilly isn’t a mother, Mum.”

“The group is for *all* the church ladies.” My mother snorted. “Anyway, she took care of that child for decades.”

“What child?”

“Old fool. Old tyrant.”

“But Milly, Rachel,” my father persisted. “Crosswords. Bridge. Knitting. Correspondence. With a brain like hers?”

“Fights with Tilly,” my mother sighed. “Seven decades of childhood fights.”

“So tiresome,” Milly remarked, when my parents returned from a trip to London to see a major Turner exhibition at the Tate. “Tilly will tell you a dozen times, if you let her, how the West African waterscapes reminded Mary Kingsley of Turner’s paintings. And what, Mr. Ellis, is the point of travelling to Africa if all you see there reminds you of an English painter? So tiresome.” She handed back the full-colour catalogue.

Now I flopped back on to the loveseat.

“We’re not finished with you yet.” Milly smiled. “Five Down. *Make farms and foes*, five. Well, child?”

*Not well*—but the word emerged. “*Yield*.” Wet, sour, my mouth closed and filled with saliva. I swallowed.

“*Yield*.” Milly ticked off the clue.

“*Yield*.” Tilly poked the pencil toward me. I wrote.

“Three more. All difficult. All *Acrosses*.” Milly’s tone was peremptory.

“And one of them is Seventeen.” Tilly’s was cold.

“That is for the end.” Milly’s lips pursed. “Eleven Across, *Fifty enter without Tudor collars calmly*, nine.”

Tilly laughed. Her leg relaxed. “Eleven, Fifty, Nine—my goodness, quite a party!”

At the New Year’s Eve party at The Green House, my father took off his jacket and tie to recite “How We Brought The Good News From Aix to Ghent.” (In Canada, he was never tieless except at the cottage, in the summer heat fragrant with raspberries, pond mud, clover, skunk.) That was his *party turn*. Then Professor McGeachie blew smoke rings and told an obscure Greek joke. (Several days later, my father was still trying to



explain it.) Then came the Lemurs' slides of English Birds. As each in turn coloured the lounge wall, Mr. Ledington said "Grebe," or "One of our many coots." For a small tousled brown creature, open-beaked, Mrs. Ledington's thin nasal voice suddenly offered, "Hardy. 'An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small, / In blast-beruffled plume.'

*This Hardy isn't that kissing Hardy, but this bird begins the answer.*

Tilly's eyes widened. "The which, dear?" I had not spoken.

"The bird was beruffled," I said.

Milly: "A Tudor collar is a ruff."

"The fifty are ruffless," Tilly mused, "or unruffed."

"The Latin for fifty is *L.*" Me.

We all said, "*Unruffled.*" I wrote it on the list. The words wavered at me.

"Two more," said Milly, "only two more."

My mother's party turn, and then the Talbots'. Laughing, my mother brought a heaped trayful of rare Oxford snow into the lounge ("She's gone out without a coat, Mr. Ellis! She'll catch her death!"), and looped hot maple syrup all over. Politely puzzled, those English people licked. I tasted winter.

Over the piano, Mrs. K had draped red velvet. Tilly beamed, Milly smiled, in their dusty rose and cranberry knitted dresses.

"A duet," Milly said.

"A rousing piece!"

"Schubert."

"*Marche Militaire.*"

The piano bench could scarcely contain those two broad beams: I poked my mother, whispering, "Siamese twins."

"Shsh! Listen."

*Militaire.* The files of notes executed their manoeuvres, while in their bright uniforms, with epaulets and harness and instruments and weapons glinting, the band played and the horses wheeled and the soldiers stepped and stepped about their square, flourishing their tiny courage. Right to the end of the keyboard the music ran up clear and high, unstoppable, Milly leaning back as her fingers fluttered precisely—and the music returned; and then it fled downward, sounding for depth and distance, Tilly's sensible shoe pressing like a lover on the pedal, her torso bent in weighty urgency above the keyboard; and then the music duly returned, returned to the blending centre and the miniature pomp, half-humorous, of the appointed melody.

"Bravo!" my father cried, on his feet and clapping while the twins rose, beamed, bowed. Tilly's hem caught on the piano bench, and Milly flipped it free.

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"Gerald, couldn't you just see them at the turn of the century?" my mother asked later. Half-asleep in the early hours of 1952, I waited for them to finish their nightcap and go off to their own room. My Christmas presents, *Scrabble* at the top, were still piled on the floor by my bed. "The young Misses Talbot, playing for company? Their hair up, their long pretty dresses?"

"Their figures, in those bustle things?"

"Really, Gerald!"

"What's important"—my father sipped his brandy—"is that they played the same piece then. Milly told me, over the punch."

"That punch wasn't up to much."

"Mrs. K has a woman's hand with the spirits. Here's to you, Rachel. You look very pretty in that dress." My parents touched glasses. "When Milly was in Cambridge with the whatsit girls, yes yes, Dickinson, Tilly went to visit her."

*Once.* Tilly in her tent, trudging among the colleges.

"During Tilly's visit, the Dickinson girls organized a musical evening. With friends. And dons, tutors—not only young people." He drank. "Tilly and Milly played, at this—*musical*, Milly called it. They played *Marche Militaire*." He drank again. "And Rachel, she said they had *quite a little triumph*." My father's voice skidded upwards.

"What else did she say about Cambridge, Gerald?"

"In Milly's judgment, the mathematical Dickinson girl should have won a certain prize, but it went to a young man. She abandoned her studies. And the other married right after taking her degree." My father finished his brandy. "My God, what lives. Rachel, do you imagine either of the Talbot girls ever—?"

"Now," said Milly triumphantly, "I'll show you Six Across."

"Oh Milly! Mayn't we try? Wouldn't you like to try, Amanda?"

Twice, Milly said, "*Not the Bohemian girl*. Five."

I didn't know who she was; how could I know who she wasn't? Perhaps I would feel better with my eyes closed.

"Milly, I haven't the faintest, foggiest clue. And tomorrow it's my turn, remember."

"You've eaten *two* fancies, Tilly. I saw. Amanda? Wake up."

Closed felt awful too. Not the opera, because in *The Times* musical clues were so rare. No. Bohemia. John Huss and Hussites. Their "narrow Calvinist thought, Amanda." And so: *hussy*.

"Is it not clever, Tilly? Tilly?"

"Yes Milly Milly. And Seventeen Across? I'll read it, shall I?" Tilly snatched the *Times*. "*Van of the broom display*, five." Silence. "*Van of the broom display*, five." Silence. "*Van of the broom display*, five. The third

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time of asking, Milly! You can't do it. We can't do it. And there's Mrs. K, coming downstairs."

Tilly threw the newspaper on to the fitted carpet before me: Hoa-Binh Winston Churchill Ideal Home Exhibition Thomas Beecham Coronation Stone Yorkshire Colliery Fire The London Library. What might Tilly and Milly do to each other with *Scrabble*? Do to me? And: Quo Tai-Chi Grand National Egyptian Parliament. Mrs. K was crossing the lobby. And: *Saskatchewan*. Foot-and-mouth disease had broken out.

In Geography at home, we coloured British Columbia green as its trees, and the Atlantic provinces blue. Purple was for unusual Quebec, and red for our Ontario. The prairies got yellow, orange, and rich brown. Saskatchewan—the *nation's granary*. All straight borders, the only one. We'd used our rulers. I moaned.

"Don't grizzle, child. It is often not possible to accomplish what one wishes. You will learn."

Tilly chuckled. "One becomes accustomed to disappointment."

Though I had never travelled there, I loved Saskatchewan.

"Miss Talbot. Miss Tilly. I'm going to be sick." The door swung open, and I was.

*April Bulmer*

*four poems from "Sisters of the Sacred Heart"*

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## Sister Lou

My Sisters and I in our summer habits gathering herbs. My hands hold the scent of sweet fennel and rosemary, sage—dusty and blue. How to say hope does not line my gut like soil or rain.

Shepherd's purse, woolly thyme . . .

Our habits are light and perfumed with God's grace, but I am a dying root, refusing the weight of pods, the glory of blossoms, and of fruit.

Lady's mantle, goat's rue . . .

I want only to lie in the earth's dark mouth, thin as mint, a single green breath.

But I cast out that demon, wander into the crop field. I am alone in alien corn: my heart is a dry husk. I ring a little bell and kneel to ask Our Father for a few kernels of love. Come Lord, I say, past the silo, the garden of herbs, the bruised reeds. Bless the stones in the pagan grounds, the bones of buffalo, their white grief. Come Jesus, I am too weak to cut a swath for thee. I am a broken machine, just another tractor rusting with the wheat.



# Sister Lou

I thought God so loved the Virgin, He Himself stepped out of His work pants, hung His belt on a nail. I wedded Him in a bridal gown, never saw His eyes, His great lips, waited all night for the jingle of keys He wears at the hip.

But God so loves me He sent Diamond. Days I watch him from the window combing the earth for knots, tending a bonfire of leaves and brown petals. I envy his steady swing and hack at a tangle of brush.

I trip on my way to chapel, fall into the rose garden. The thorns break my skin, my ankles and calves bleed. Diamond takes me to his shed where he stores his tools and bags of loam, lays me down on a burlap sack: a leak in the roof, a hymn gentle from the chapel. Mud on my hem, a smell of cider and smoke. My hose torn, blood on my shoelaces. A hot drink, eggs scrambled over fire, crusty bread Diamond hacks from a loaf. When the cinders die, shadows sweep the ashes.

## Sister Lou

The nuns pray for me—dark bird beating from their flock—peck at me for weeks. They hold me in their downy dreams. When it snows that April, a lily opens her white mouth as though to sing, then purses her stiff lips. Nights I drag my belly and curse my thighs. Nights I lie low and hiss.

I dream my heart is a boulder I roll from the grave, my wimple hangs in the sepulchre like a bat, beats from the cave. I cross the lawn, take the cross from my neck, pull the wedding band from my finger. Diamond digs a little hole in the earth. I drop them in: the chain, the charm, the perfect gold ring. He fills the hollow and pats the mound. He finds a stone on the path to the barn, a fist-sized rock, a few specks of pink at the base. I plant it firm.

# Sister Page

Sister Lou's vows are a clutch of faded roses, three broken stems, fallen petals not beautiful in her hands. No longer a bride spinning inside her lace, she is a black widow mourning the lining of her hood.

She packs a little bag, tosses the habit like a pall over the iron bed. She kisses the Saviour as she kneels in the chapel on her way. Touches my shoulder, says *Peace of Christ*.

Diamond waits in a dark truck, the motor throbbing. Lou wears the white blouse, knitted cardigan and Black Watch kilt of the school girls. Adolescent, her hair braided long. Then the pickup like a black boot kicking the prairie.

I am upstairs sewing, lifting the hem of her habit for me to wear. Holding her cloth: the dark web from which she slipped. Lou is wound tight round the hard spool of my heart. She is the bright thread I pull through a tough weave.



*David Hart*

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## Crag Inspector

1

Eight baby puffins impatient  
to leap off the lower edges  
and three still parents;

the black-eyed gull even sulkier  
than usual, as if the best  
fish of the night got away;

the dog daisy almost losing  
its hold on the overhang  
asks me nothing and I can do nothing.

2

Doing my job  
    by the letter  
on good days  
    by the spirit  
I meet myself asking  
awkward questions, the job a quarrel  
between urgency  
and patience.

I tell myself to speak  
and to keep silent.

3

There's a gull follows me around,  
we are partial  
to the same kind of biscuits.

Our planet is going into the darkness  
of the dead. No-one will be here  
to describe it as progress.

The pilgrimage daily  
to be kept in good nick  
as the sun rises and sets,  
all my surfaces.

4

My irrelevant 'I,' an itch  
to the rock if the rock feels anything

ramparted by Celts  
besieged by Romans  
nailed by rock climbers  
overflowed by fighter jets  
picnicked on by tourists  
dynamited by quarriers  
used for mere height by radar operators

the rock inspects me.

5

All my foreshortened life  
ever since I could run ahead  
and get a grip on a crag  
my eyes have been reflections of slate  
flaking

from one day to the next  
from one week to the next,  
from one month to the next,  
from one year to the next. In the morning

I wake with their shapes in my mind  
so that sometimes at breakfast  
after an intense dream of flying  
I am the mountain, its hardness,  
its cracks and gullies. In the mist cormorants,

guillemots, gulls,  
razorbills, puffins, occasionally  
gannet, shearwaters and, I saw once,  
an arctic skua,  
have no statutory existence,  
only presence.

6

I do the job  
day after day  
and it makes a life.

Christmas comes  
and Easter  
and the tourist season,  
I don't ask these times to come,

they come and I fit in,  
and it makes a life.

7

I return to my windowless hut,  
a cliff cupboard really, no room  
even for a chair. The whitewashed walls

are so white, so plain white,  
glaring so white at me,  
seeing what I see there  
I think (and I like thinking)  
I am going mad  
while not knowing the difference.

I wonder sometimes if gulls  
go mad, or crabs, or seals.  
So far as I know I've never seen a mad one,

in fact the thought strikes me  
as absurd. Back to work then,



keep a sandwich in my pocket  
for later, my pencil needs sharpening,  
I'll do that on the way up.

8

I have seen silk scarves ooze out of crevices,  
the tips of ladies' fingers come and go in the evening light,  
I have seen a rupture open out of a pure green skirt  
so that the spray wanted wiping from it with bladder wrack,  
I have had ferns smoothing my way and holding me back,  
shale has rolled me into the ocean almost.

9

Off the mountain  
I inspect cracks in pavements,  
I inspect holes in bread,  
I inspect fault lines in biscuits,  
my home breaks slowly apart.

10

Better to have your voice  
taken away by the sea wind  
than fill a large room  
with every word heard.

11

This dead razorbill  
seems to have broken a leg  
and torn a wing,  
taken shelter  
and accepted death.

When I bury it under stones  
other birds collect themselves overhead,  
hover as if through a window,  
now let themselves be taken by the wind.

I am unable to speak,  
 I hesitate,  
 I begin sentences—people wait,  
 more often a tree, an outcrop,  
 a gull—I begin sentences  
 and I don't complete whatever it was.

*Something* speaks.  
 The people who constructed with stone and turf  
 circular houses on the slopes  
 of the mountain,  
 they speak to me still.

*Something* speaks.

The Romans who conquered in Latin, long  
 marching columns of it along long straight roads  
 of it to build high slate walls of it,  
 they speak to me still.

*Something* speaks.

Something else, something else,  
 something I can't explain,  
 something that comes with the job.  
 Have I spoken about the terrors?

The visits.

As if I were not born.

Or knew too much.

As if I shall be wandering down there  
     on the lowest grass above the sea  
 and be found by chance by my closest  
 who will not recognise me

but will instead days later  
 report me missing.

I might tell you about the writing I have seen  
running along the sheer faces after rain  
from crag to crag, or when I've been tired at the end  
of a hot day, but honestly I can't say

I've ever been able to decipher it. The signs,  
you understand, the inherent speech of the rock,  
its necessary speech. I could ask myself again  
say Friday week and see if I've had better luck.



# The Only Place He Felt All Right

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*Will Harvey*

**T**he motorcyclist went in slowly, steering instead of leaning his bike, but the wheels shot out anyway. They shot out fishlike, rippling the deep gravel. The handlebars parted, escaped his fingers, and he was left floating. There was gentleness and absolutely nothing to think about, until the shock of the ground and his bones shook him awake.

Embarrassed, he pushed the bike back up. He pushed the bike back up quickly, but inside he was going slow. Inside he was heaven, grains of sand and light.

The motel office was wood-panelled. It smelled of wet nails. "You ought to grade that lot or something," he said to the man behind the counter. He put his helmet down. He slapped at the fine white dust on his jacket.

"Wiped out, huh?" said the man. "That's rough."

The man was sitting in an overstuffed avocado armchair. He was watching football on a tiny television. "You need a room?" said the man. He reached up and slapped a card down onto the counter. He did not get out of the chair. "Fill that out if you need a room."

The motorcyclist started writing. When he came to 'address,' he stopped. He held the pen like a dart above the counter. Then he wrote down Irene's address.

The man got out of the chair and scrutinized the card without appearing to actually read it. He looked up at the motorcyclist. "Welcome to Florida," he said. He grinned. "What brings you down here?"

"Curiosity," said the motorcyclist.

"That's magic," said the man.

The man had a red afro, black-framed glasses and a polyester shirt. Behind the lenses, his eyes looked wet, as if he'd been crying.

"Are you all right?" said the motorcyclist.

"Yeah, I'm all right. What do you mean?" said the man.

"You look upset."

"I'm not upset. Hell. Are you upset?"

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"No. I'm good," said the motorcyclist.

"Well, then?" said the man.

They looked at each other across the counter. The man cocked his head. "Have I ever seen you on television?"

"No. I don't think I've ever been on television," said the motorcyclist.

"But you could have been, right? You could have been on T.V. and you wouldn't have known it," said the man.

"I guess so," said the motorcyclist.

"I think you'll like it here," said the man. "Great weather. Here, take these vouchers for the lounge . . . on account of your mishap."

"Right," said the motorcyclist.

He went outside. Across the highway, through the sun and motel ruins and dry palms, the gulf lay limp and boundless. It had a feeling—that sticky calm the motorcyclist would feel before vomiting.

The motorcyclist pushed the bike carefully through the gravel and stood it in front of his room. The saddlebags were new. They sparkled dude-like against the age, the dirty creases and faded metal of the bike. He unbuckled the bags and went inside. The door jolted open, light as balsa wood. The only resistance was the stale drain-pipe air of the room.

The motorcyclist threw his saddlebags onto the bed and turned on the television. He sat down on the bed and looked around the room. It was a sad room. There was wear—the chipped and scarred wood of the desk and bureau, the frayed fabric of the armchair. The motorcyclist could feel the passing of others. But the idea was, they had never been there. This was the understanding between him and the motel. The room had been wiped clean of specific traces. There was nothing under the bed, nothing in the drawer, just the Bible and the phone book. The idea was, the room was pristine. But when the motorcyclist took off his boots and socks and put his bare feet down on the matted shag carpet, he could feel the feet of others in the soaked and oily fibre. As he walked to the toilet, his foot-steps disappeared beneath him. He had already never been there.

The motorcyclist hung a leak, then he made a phone call. "It's me," he said to the answering machine. "I'm in Florida, in case you've been wondering. You probably haven't been wondering. I'm all the way down here in Florida. You wouldn't have guessed that about me, huh? You probably thought I was on my way back. But no, I'm here. I don't even have a road map, you know. And I'm feeling different. I think I'm different now," he said. He paused. "Do you know who this is?" he said.

The motorcyclist watched the television for a while, then he took a shower. When he got out of the shower, it was dark in the room with just the light of the television and the light from the parking lot coming through the quarter-moon window of knobby green glass in the door. He

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turned off the television set and got into bed. The sheets were coarse and slippery, like nylon. He sat with his back wet against the pillows.

He sat naked in the bed in the dark. Now and then he would look at the green window, forgetting he could not see through it. He heard people bumping around in the next room. He heard the murmur and squeak of their voices. He heard them leave their room and drive away. He tried to see them through the green window. He remembered a "Twilight Zone" episode in which, outside the people's door, the world had become a different planet.

Later the motorcyclist went out. He stood on the concrete sidewalk which ended in drifts of gravel and looked at his bike. He admired the way it held the incandescent light. He admired the shadows in the metal. He felt like a true motorcyclist inside his stiff leather jacket.

He crossed over the highway and went down a sand-covered walkway between two mouldy Spanish-style motels. The breeze was up, and the oil and silver water was bubbling against the shore. The breeze blew into his ears and inside his head like a shell. The motorcyclist imagined he had stopped breathing, that he didn't need to breathe any more, because he was inside the lung of the world.

He asked himself some questions, such as where he was and why he had left. Sometimes he would panic in a crowd. Sometimes he would sneak out of a party without saying goodbye. Weekends, he would usually stay at home. Irene would go out. The motorcyclist would stay at home and masturbate. He would masturbate while in his head he retraced the sex scenes of his life. His life was a montage of clipped and foreign exchanges in which he was no longer a participant. The motorcyclist would masturbate into the past, trying to catch up by going backward.

After he had come, the motorcyclist would return to a wan present. He would sit still while the stillness of living collapsed upon him. He was confronted by a mounting catalogue of missed opportunities: jobs, films, trips, women, rock bands. Come and gone. Only when he stopped thinking was he able to make it out of the apartment and down to his motorcycle.

He kept his motorcycle in the street, always where he could see it from the window. He loved the motorcycle, and it made him uneasy. One day he would get on the bike and that would be it. He would be launched irretrievably forward, unable to retrace or even remember his steps.

The beach was mauve and phosphorescent. The motorcyclist noticed something in the sand. A woman's underpants. He bent down and picked them up. He zipped them into his jacket pocket. Then he returned to the motel.

He made a call from the pay phone outside the lounge. This time there



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was a message for him on the answering machine. It went, "Fuck you, limp dick! You're history. Here listen . . ." A man's voice came on. "Hey there!" the voice said like a game show host.

The motorcyclist hung up the phone and went into the lounge. He took a stool at the horseshoe bar. He put his feet up on the rung of the stool. "Can I drink scotch on these vouchers?" he said.

"Long as it's from the well, you can," said the bartender. "How would you like it?"

"Just ice," said the motorcyclist.

The bartender pulled down a glass from overhead.

The motorcyclist drank quickly, because he was alone. He bought a pack of Marlboros with his next drink, even though he did not smoke.

"No time like the present," he said to the bartender.

"How so?" said the bartender.

The motorcyclist shrugged his shoulders. He looked down at his hands. The bartender gave him a funny look. The motorcyclist started tearing open the pack of cigarettes, then he put the pack unopened in his pocket.

The lounge was stained wood and beer lights. Quiet, with undefined corners. There were some people talking softly at the tables. A man and a woman sat down at the bar across from him. They were in their early forties, about ten years older than him. The man and the woman were wearing matching yellow satin jackets with red stripes on the sleeves. Race car driver jackets.

The woman was attractive. She was blond and well-tanned, and her jacket was unzipped part way, showing off a nice pair of breasts. The motorcyclist guessed that the woman had nothing on beneath the jacket.

While the bartender was taking orders at the tables, the man got up and walked to the toilet. It was just the motorcyclist and the woman at the bar. "Howdy," she said, tipping her glass.

"Hey," said the motorcyclist.

"Where ya from, hon?"

"New York," said the motorcyclist.

"Why not, right? I mean, why not?" said the woman. "So. What brings you down?" Her eyes moved like bats, erratic, never landing.

"Problems," said the motorcyclist.

"Ha! Don't I know it. Me and Buddy, too," said the woman.

"Yeah? What kind of problems do you have?" said the motorcyclist.

"Boredom problems. We've got big time boredom problems," said the woman. She paused and took a drink. "Ever since we won the lottery, we've been flying around like a pair of idiots in Buddy's twin-seater." She laughed.

"Sounds like hell," said the motorcyclist.



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"It is, hon. I assure you. Not a picnic."

"Did you really win the lottery?"

"I guess I oughtn't to have told you. That's our policy, not to tell anyone, especially not friends. I must be feeling good. Are you feeling good yet?"

"I'm half-way to feeling good," said the motorcyclist. He planted a look on her.

"Watch that now, hon," she said. Her eyes stopped moving around for a second. "You're messing with a bored woman over here."

The man came back from the toilet. He was still tinkering with his fly as he sat down.

"Ho ho!" he said. "I'm in the can five minutes and someone's already trying to pick up my sister."

The man had a chirpy voice, full of enthusiasm. His entire body jiggled when he spoke.

"That's right, Buddy. We've got a date," said the woman.

"Well, what's his name?" said the man.

She shrugged, dragging a finger through her drink. "What's your name, hon?"

"What? You're dating this guy and you don't know his name?" said the man.

"No," said the woman, "And something else, too."

"Go on. I'm all elephants," said the man.

"I spilled the beans. I spilled the beans on us, Buddy."

"Oh Christy! You didn't. He knows?"

She nodded.

"He knows! Now we'll have to buy his drinks," said the man. "Morality dictates that we buy this gentleman's drinks for the balance of the evening." The man spun around on his stool. He waved to the bartender. "Excuse me! Frank!" he said.

The man ordered drinks all around. He said, "Frank, we don't want to see bottoms here. Keep them coming, please."

"Hon's a stranger here, Buddy. He's from New York," said the woman.

"How'd you get down here, stranger?" said the man.

"Motorcycle," said the motorcyclist.

"That yours I saw outside?" said the man.

"Yup," said the motorcyclist.

"O.K. then," said the man, slapping the bar. "Now we're getting somewhere. Things are coming together here."

The motorcyclist said, "Your sister tells me you've got a twin-seater."

"Four-seater in actuality," said the man. "A Cessna 180. I took the

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back seats out for skydiving." He took a large swallow of his drink. "I've had that plane since before we bought the winning ticket. I've always had an airplane. It's the one constant."

"Maybe we all oughta go up for a spin right now," said the woman.

"Not right now," said the man. "Right now we're on the ground. Right now we're getting our legs."

The woman made a sad face. "Maybe I'll put something on the jukebox, then," she said.

"No jukebox," said the man. "Quiet time." He grew serious. "Could you do with some quiet time, stranger?"

"Quiet time sounds fine to me, Buddy."

The woman stared into the well of the bar. "I don't want any fucking quiet time, Buddy!" she said. "I've had enough quiet time. Hon here has some problems I haven't asked him about."

"Your friend has come a long way with an engine in his ear and his feet up on a pair of pegs. You can ask him about his problems later on. Later on we'll all go back to the room and you can ask him. Right now we're getting our legs," said the man. He reached out to touch her hair, then he drew his hand back.

They began to drink in silence. Before anyone could finish his drink, the bartender would put a fresh one down on the bar in front of the old drink. The motorcyclist kept his eyes on his drink and on the bar. Once in a while, he would look up. He would look up first at the man, then at the woman. The man would be staring off at an angle. The woman would be looking straight back at him. The motorcyclist started looking up just at the woman. He forgot about the man. After a while it got so he and the woman would look up at each other and break out laughing. Sometimes they couldn't stop.

Once, when he was laughing like this, the motorcyclist looked over at the man. The man made bug-eyes at him. The man pretended his hand was an airplane and flew it toward the motorcyclist, out over the chasm of the bar.

"Enough," said the woman, holding up her hand. "We've had enough now, Frank."

The motorcyclist got into the back seat of a champagne Cadillac Seville. The woman climbed in beside him.

"Our date officially starts now," she said.

The motorcyclist sank back into the plush velour seat. Little overhead lights illuminated the woman's skin. She put her hand on the motorcyclist's thigh and started running her nails over his jeans. Her nails were long, with star-shaped inlays.

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The man swung the car onto the highway. "Stranger," he said, looking into the rearview, "It looks to me like you want to fuck my sister to-night."

The man drove well for the number of drinks he had in him. He kept the windows closed and the air conditioner on. No sound from the engine or the outside world came into the car.

"Tell us about those problems now, stranger," said the man. "Why is it you're on the road? I know you're not vacationing. We recognize each other, I think."

"Go on, hon," said the woman. She brushed the motorcyclist's hair back behind his ear. "We want to know," she said.

"That's right. We're ready now," said the man.

"If that's what you want. O.K.," said the motorcyclist. He sat forward in the seat. He rolled his neck. "My problems didn't start until recently. Before that, everything was O.K. I had a nice job and a nice girl. I went to work during the day. At night me and Irene would go out. Life was normal. Then one day I stopped going out. It happened all of a sudden. Just like that I didn't want to go out any more.

"O.K. So after that, two things happened. First I went out to lunch with a friend. He brought some newspapers with him, newspapers from different cities. He spread the newspapers out on the table and started looking through the rentals. He was going to choose a city and live there. He was ready to go anywhere. Come on, he said. Pick a city.

"I tried to pick a city, but I couldn't. It made me feel sick, trying to pick a city."

The motorcyclist paused. He looked from the woman to the man, then he continued. "A week or so later Irene and I were in her car. We were going over to New Jersey for dinner, and we got stuck in traffic inside the Lincoln Tunnel. Nothing was moving. I couldn't go left or right. I could only sit there. I'd been stuck millions of times before, but this time was different. This time it meant something.

"I said to Irene, This is it. This is my life right here in this tunnel. The life I want is out there, out the sides of the tunnel. You know, not straight ahead, but sideways.

"Irene gave me a strange look. She said, Bigshot, you've got to get through this tunnel before you can go anywhere. She thought I was just talking and so did I. But next day I was at the shop, buying saddlebags."

The motorcyclist stayed sitting forward on the seat, like he was expecting something big to happen. Then he was sinking, afraid he had told too much.

"That's a good story, hon," said the woman. She slid her hand between his legs. "I like that one. What about the girl? Did you leave the girl?"



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"As it turns out, yes," said the motorcyclist.

"You left the girl and now you're going to fuck my sister," said the man into the rearview. "You're out of the tunnel. You're in the wide-open, and now you're going to fuck everything comes your way, am I right?"

"Don't start, Buddy," said the woman.

"Relax," said the man, "We're O.K. here. The stranger and I know each other."

"I don't know where I am, Buddy," said the motorcyclist. "I think maybe I've still got a ways to go."

"Nuts, hon," said the woman. "You're with us. You're with the lottery winners."

"Oh yeah?" said the motorcyclist. "Where's that?"

"Where you want to be," she said. "We're the people whose picture you see in the paper and you ask yourself, Why can't that be me?"

"I'm not like you guys. I'm on my own here," said the motorcyclist.

"Hey stranger, relax! We recognize each other. Sit back. That's the Gulf of Mexico out there!"

The motorcyclist frowned and moved away from the woman. He put his face against the window and looked out into the gulf. He felt very alone, so he moved back across the seat. Her body folded to fit his.

The motorcyclist thought about what to say, feeling he should say something. "You know, Buddy," he began, "I've read it can be tough winning the lottery. The old lifestyle goes to hell. They send you out there swimming. Maybe what you and your sister need is a hobby."

"Is that a fact," said the man, flatly.

"Yeah," said the motorcyclist. He grinned. The woman was doing good things with her hand. "A hobby would help ease the boredom a little."

"Is that a fact," said the man.

The balcony was attached to a giant pink castle of a hotel. They sat in white plastic chairs. Below them lights bounced off the water. People strolled the shoreline. The motorcyclist leaned toward the woman and put his tongue in her ear.

"Whoa, hon," she said. "I'm already yours."

The man came through the sliding doors with a bottle of gin, ice in a bucket and plastic cups.

"What about mix?" said the woman.

"Fuck mix," said the man. "Nobody's here for mix." He poured the drinks. "How about another story? Who's got a story?" he said.

The motorcyclist shrugged. The woman did not respond.

"O.K. then," said the man. "I've got a story."

"I think I already know this story," said the woman.



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"You can sit through it again for the stranger's sake," said the man.

"Look, Buddy, I—" said the motorcyclist, moving forward on his seat.

"Oh no. It's O.K., stranger. Really."

"Hand me that bottle," said the woman. "Here, hon," she said, topping off the motorcyclist's cup. "You're going to need some too."

"Go easy on me," said the motorcyclist, placing his hand over his cup.

"There's these two people," began the man. "They're married and what they do for a living is move houses around. They're contractors, you see. She works in the office taking orders. He goes out to prepare the sites for the trucks which back up underneath the houses and drive away with them. He's got to make sure there's enough clearance for the trucks, so they don't run into trees and wires and the like.

"Thing is, these two people live in one of the houses themselves, the kind you can pick up and move in a matter of minutes. She's O.K., because she stays in the office. She doesn't see this picking up and moving around of houses. He doesn't do so well. He starts having nightmares. He dreams that while he's sleeping, trucks come and move his house on him. In the dream he wakes up and his house is moving. He looks out the window and he sees trees going by. He sees shopping malls and fast food joints, but he doesn't recognize the highway. He doesn't know where they're taking him. Out the window it all looks the same.

"Even when he's sleeping in a different place, a hotel for example, which is impossible to move, he dreams the building is being carted away. He gets bad. He sweats and throws punches in his sleep. His wife won't sleep in the same bed with him. And this. This is the part which makes the whole thing a story. The only place the guy feels all right? The only place the guy feels all right is in the air, is in a fucking airplane. Up there he feels delivered. Up there it's religion."

The man raised both his arms in the air. "Now how do you like that?" he said.

"I like that story, Buddy," said the motorcyclist. Down on the beach he saw two people kissing. They were standing barefoot in the water.

"Really fucking excellent, Buddy," said the woman. "But you left out a thing or two." She thrust her drink at him. It sloshed over the sides of the cup.

"You left out the part about how the wife is left to be alone all day in the office, and alone at night, wondering what in the hell is happening to the man in the next room. You left out the part about how after they win the lottery, they pick up and leave everything behind. They leave their whole fucking lives behind and start flying around the fucking country. And you left out the best part, Buddy. I'm surprised you missed this, you know. The part where he starts introducing her as his sister in places where people don't know them."

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The man and the woman stared at each other. They stared like two people remembering one another from a past life.

"Right!" said the motorcyclist. "Now I get it. Right!" He laughed out loud.

The man stood up abruptly. There was trouble passing over his face. "I'm going out to the airfield," he said. "I'll get her ready. You all take a cab out there and meet me in an hour. We could all stand to go up for a spin. Some good is going to come out of this somehow."

"Yup!" said the woman. "Without a doubt." She held her cup above her head, toasting him. She held the cup up there until he was gone.

There were two double beds in the room. The covers on the bed were perfectly smooth, new-looking. The motorcyclist and the woman sat down on one of the beds. He tried to kiss her. She leaned away. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed his mouth to hers.

"I knew you weren't brother and sister," he said.

"Congratulations," said the woman.

The motorcyclist kissed the woman again. This time she let him. They kissed and rolled around on the bed.

The motorcyclist stopped kissing the woman and kneeled over her. He undid the zipper on his jacket pocket. He took out the underpants he had found on the beach earlier. "Put these on," he said.

"I don't know," said the woman. "They're kind of sandy."

"Just do it," said the motorcyclist. "And we're going to keep that door open too. So I can hear the water."

"The water doesn't make much noise," said the woman.

The motorcyclist spoke emphatically. "I can hear it, because I know it's there," he said.

The woman took the underpants from him and started wriggling out of her jeans.

The motorcyclist reached his hand inside her yellow satin jacket. "I knew there was nothing beneath this jacket," he whispered.

"Congratulations," said the woman.

After the motorcyclist had fucked the woman, he started falling asleep, but she shook him awake. "Come on, hon. Buddy's waiting on us," she said.

"I'm not going," he said. He was drunk. He felt like vomiting.

"Don't you want to go up for a spin?" she said.

"No." He kept his face pressed into the pillow.

"If you come up for a spin, I'll let you take me around on the back of your bike. I'll press these tits into your back. I'll paint these nails red and dig them into your black leather jacket. We'll go anywhere you want to go."

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The woman pulled the motorcyclist up off the bed and got him into the elevator. Inside the elevator there was a bright mist of cigarette smoke. The motorcyclist rested his head against the wall. She watched the light skipping across the buttons.

A cab took them back along the highway. The motorcyclist and the woman sat apart on the clammy vinyl seat. He wanted to be far away from this woman who was carrying his juice inside her. She was a distance, a matter of time.

Through the window of the cab, he saw his motel pass, saw his bike standing there in front of his room. Soon they were on the causeway.

The man was waiting. He was vibrant. His shoulders twitched. "Glad you could make it," he said in his chirpy voice. He led them across the tarmac. "I thought you two had eloped."

It was still dark out, but the sky was bleaching. A faint light was coming through the clouds.

"How'd it go? Did you score?" said the man to the woman.

"Fuck off, Buddy," she said. "Let's just get this over with."

"All right," said the man, cheerfully. Then, "There she is!" he said, clapping the motorcyclist on the back.

The Cessna was pulled forward on the tarmac.

"This is going to be just the thing. Some good is going to come of this," said the man.

"Sure thing, Buddy," mumbled the motorcyclist.

The man climbed up into the cockpit. The woman and the motorcyclist walked around the plane. She pulled open the door. It swung up and out, under the wing. The woman sat in the jumping space with her back against the parachutes. She let the motorcyclist have the seat.

The man put on a pair of glasses. He smiled. "Don't worry. I see fine. I really do."

He tinkered in the dark, then the instrument panel lit up. It reminded the motorcyclist of the instrument panel on his bike, how when riding at night he would see only the panel and nothing else, and he would aim the panel into the dark like he was flying.

The man started the engine. Then he started the propeller spinning. "There's nothing to it," said the man. "It's easier than driving."

The motorcyclist had never been in a small plane before. He was unprepared for the tangible struggle of take-off. The entire plane shook. The doors rattled. The side windows rippled like cellophane.

"It really feels like you're flying," said the motorcyclist.

"Ha ha," said the man.

Soon the plane was out over the water.

"No tunnels up here," said the man waving his arm. "Up here, it's wide open. God's element."



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The motorcyclist watched out the window, trying to see. There was the glow of the beach, then just the oily darkness of the water.

The motorcyclist fought it, but his thoughts kept drawing him down into sleep. He would shake himself awake, focus on a waking thought, but the thought would bend and warp. The argument seemed far away, or at least in another room, not in the same tiny space in the sky. "Fifteen years is . . .," the man was saying. "It's a choice you . . .," he heard the woman say.

The motorcyclist's thoughts were squiggly lines. His head touched the window. The woman switched places with him. He lay down on the floor of the plane.

"You go off now, hon," she said. "We'll wake you up if anything good happens."

In his dream the motorcyclist woke up and the cockpit was empty. The man and woman had parachuted. The plane was flying by itself. The door was wide open. The gushing breeze corrugated his clothing.

He squeezed up into the cockpit. The plane was flying level. It was so simple. The motorcyclist laughed. The sun came in in sheets of glass. Below him was water. Sideways was a vast curving bough of space. Sharp and milky as quartz.

He had some time before things would begin happening. Inside he let himself go slow. Inside he became grains of sand and light. He drifted beyond his own outline and discovered a vast sucking calm. It sucked the bad dreams out of him. It sucked the him out of him and he forgot everything.

The plane fell. As he began to die, he woke up.

He woke up to the smell of urine and the breeze pasting his pants to his skin. The door was open. For a second he thought he might still be in the air, but then he saw the fuzzy grey expanse of the tarmac.

He climbed out of the plane. He would walk until his pants were dry, he decided. Then he would stop at the first place and have pancakes and coffee. It would not matter what the place was like, whether it was a slick place or whether it was a dive. He would go in there for breakfast.

His faith was abundant.



*C.E. Hull*

*two poems*

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## spider

mum burnt pornographic magazines in the garage / a  
little fire to warm herself by on cold concrete /  
i didnt understand why she was burning them / as i  
caught the sight of bodies in smoke / of naked men  
& women dancing on fire together / your father brings  
these home from work to show your little brothers /  
its wrong / he shouldnt be doing it / a splash of  
turpentine & the bonfire boofed up to the roof / a  
womans breasts connected to legs without a face /  
curling around in cinders up around the rafters /  
my trolley sat unused by some planks of stored  
wood / i could not play with my squeaky red trolley  
today / i could not connect it to my three wheeler  
& ride away to the other end of the backyard / a  
huge black spider was in it / it had made a dense  
web & sat in the middle of it poised & waiting  
for my fingers on it / mum mum: i called / she came  
out from the house / she went into the garage / you  
wait outside: she said & shut the door behind her /  
later on she showed me the black spider in a jar  
of turpentine / all its long legs curled in together /  
as though it was hugging itself / & the turpentine  
milky white / as though all the goodness of spider  
had dissolved into it

# praying mantis

my fathers back to me / digging in the front garden  
with a spade / planting the jagged concrete pieces  
in / & introduced trees later to be trimmed / & fat  
cold earthworms to be split by the hook / i watched  
as he unearthed a giant praying mantis / as green  
as the front lawn ripe with insect movement & heat /  
like the sound of concrete & grass whistling if the  
hose was left running on it / the mantis faced my  
father standing upright & began to box the shadow  
of a huge man / dad stopped digging with a breath  
out & raised his left hand / the mantis swayed from  
side to side as if trying to confuse my father or  
duck blows / suddenly i saw the mantis as six feet  
high & my father as quite small / i grabbed hold of  
my friends hand & took him around the side trellis /  
i told him the new word / i whispered: my father is  
a shit / friends thin blond hair pricked his ear as  
he jumped / like when i had asked my nan about the  
word cunt / who told you that word / the kids at  
school / well its a very bad word / i looked up at  
her / is it worse than fuck / yes its a very very  
bad word so dont let me catch you saying it / &  
stop picking your nose or it will end up like a  
black fellas / & dont go cross-eyed or the wind  
will change direction / & be good or santa wont  
come / & dont cry or the disprin wont work / & dont  
be naughty or jesus will punish you / friend went &  
told my father who looked about to sweep the mantis  
into oblivion with the spade / instead he threw it  
down onto the grass clippings / & i raced inside to  
my bedroom / & hid behind the wooden door & his heavy  
footsteps down the hallway / he knocked me down with

blows to the head / black thuds to a red face on a  
short green dress / outside i could see my friend  
satisfied / & i knew the praying mantis would be  
swaying to the breeze / about to take flight / a  
moment away from death / on razor-edged legs /  
barely touching down on the upturned earth

*Carolyn Marie Souaid*

*two poems*

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## night

on the dusty lampshade  
my list of orders  
in case we have to run in the  
soot of the night  
blackened lungs  
broken beds in the street

my eye climbs the wall  
to where the paper's lifted away  
dry, yellow as fire

open crack in the ceiling where  
the French Eyeball spies on me and the  
cardboard box under my bed  
scotch-taped a hundred times  
treasures i'll take:

blue marble  
mummy's old lipstick  
two sea shells, a perfect spelling test  
wing of a dead moth

midnight hurls  
boulders at my chest, flaming rooftops  
i pray to God for rain



# 1970

war on the street  
marie-france and me, like criminals  
best friends

sleep-overs saved for daytime between shadows  
of fast-moving clouds and scrabby bushes  
behind the shopping centre

mouths lightly touching

we crouch  
in our dark leafy beds wet  
with autumn, naked  
arms and legs mingled with the roots of plants

j't'aime et j't'protege  
she murmurs

black night  
closing in on us

her tea-coloured lips  
a cushion of fruit in my mouth

# All Men are Immortal

*for Thomas Vinnedge Allison*

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*Lisa Daus Neville*

**Y**ou want to feel yourself up inside the skin of that life. You want to know all about what it means to be alive, to breathe, to walk, to be sitting in one room and imagining yourself in another. You want to be too hot and sweat and then to know about pain like when a burning cigarette ash falls on the back of your hand only deeper, harsher more irredeemable. You want to know about fever and illness and then death. You want to know how the coral reefs look from under forty feet of water and how the oxygen hose ties you to a newer world where you walk on two feet but you are not quite at home there yet. You want to be naked everywhere there is environment to press against your nakedness. You want to know everything about sex how you are moved to nothing short of insanity by that mouth on your belly those fingers across your pubis. You want to be forced to sleep to feel your body fall into a place of all possibilities. You want to dream and in your dreams you will stand on the highest peak of the Himalayas in black leather boots cracking under the weight of snow and you will laugh. You want to know all about the secrets of suffering and shame and compassion and evil. You want to build cities and destroy them. You want to pick fruit and eat it. You want to be thirsty. You want to know desire. You want to die.

So you are born.

You think later this may have been a mistake.

Once you have form you forget everything you knew and you have to know everything else all over again. You must expend energy. You love and your love is not returned. You suffer and you never understand why. You begin to know fear. You have life and life excites you, terrifies you, bores you but you cannot remember not having it and you cannot tolerate imagining its absence. You do not understand anything but hunger.

Imagine you are a 15 year old girl riding a Greyhound bus and you are not sure of your destination. You are riding north on the Pacific Coast route: San Diego to Seattle. At the moment you are riding through California's Central Valley in the window seat, last aisle up against the

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restroom, the seats that don't recline but that's O.K. because you don't sleep. You don't sleep because you like the way the darkness is broken by small California towns, neon lights over gas stations, fluorescent lights of 24 hour chain coffee shops. You are 15 and you could get off the bus at any of these small towns and imagine a life. You could walk down any five block long main street, into any 24 hour coffee shop, off of any freeway, stand on any overpass and you will be offered shelter. And because all possibilities are open to you, there is no need to choose. Because you have never chosen you feel no guilt for this life and you continue lighting cigarettes, one off the butt of the other.

At Santa Maria a man boards the bus and makes his way to the seat adjoining yours. In the beginning we were here, he says to you, but everything looked different. He looks to be in his middle years, pressed pants and cowboy boots. His hands are larger than any hands you have ever before seen. They rest on his thighs like stones. Those are the kind of hands you want on your hips, choking your flesh, turning you over. They are hard enough to bite into your softness. The man sitting in the seat next to you claims he chose this life. He takes a cigarette from your pack and tells you he can never die. You feel his terrible burden of responsibility. You want to feel yourself up against the skin of this life, he says. You want to be naked everywhere.

You must remember now that you are 15 years old and that, although you are leaving an intolerable situation, you still believe in life as a place of all possibility. You ask the man sitting next to you if he knew Jesus. He shrugs. Who does God love more, you ask, Judas Iscariot or Jesus Christ? This is a question the nuns used to ask you. Who made the greater sacrifice? Once I was born, he says, I lost my capacity to know anything. You pass through darkness, all the passengers have turned their overhead lights off. When the dawn breaks, there are brown hills outside the windows, wild sage and trailer parks. You pass a place in the endless fields of grapes and lettuce and artichokes and asparagus where the fields break and a row of shack houses emerge strange smoke issuing from their doorways. "I worked here for 300 years," he says. "Pulling food out of the ground. There is nowhere I pass through that I can't remember pain. I sleep under cardboard and spit. It burns my back in the daytime and freezes my thighs at night. I forget everything but hunger." Because food has been given to you all your life and you have never questioned its origin you cannot understand. "You chose this life," you say to him. "I have lived seven thousand years," he says, "and I slept everywhere." For the first time, the very first, you feel sections of the world close to you. You want to forget. When he gets off the bus in Modesto you follow him.

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"Imagine you are swimming in a river," Tom said to me soon after I met him. "It is August and the river is crowded with the bodies of other children. Tree branches hang from sodden trunks and trail in the water. There is a place in the river where a waterfall hits a mass of piled up boulders and if you swim under those rocks and under the falls and if you don't drown trying you will reach a clear pool on the other side of the river where no one will ever laugh at you again."

"Is that how you spent your summers?" I asked Tom.

Shot full of amphetamines.

You are a girl laying with a man in a Modesto motel room off Interstate 5. It's another summer and you are hungry for a lot that isn't food. You look down at his erection and it is glistening with your fluid. He is hard with a desire that has nothing to do with you. I've got to sleep, he says. You pull your body forward and up and off the bed and walk to the table and reach into your bag. You have a bottle of seconal in your hand and you walk into the bathroom and pour two glasses of water and bring them back to the side of the bed. You take three seconals and give him the bottle and a glass of water. You sleep, you say, I'm going out.

In this heat?

I want to move.

He watches you dress and leave the room. He swallows all the pills in the bottle and lies back down. He knows the sound the door will make behind you and what route you will travel and his interest passes as soon as the knowledge registers. You pull the door behind you gently. He hits the pillow once with the flat of his hand. He has always possessed this gift, not of prophecy, but of infallible imagination.

Tom stood in the doorway to my bedroom twelve years ago. "I grew up in the heat," he said. "I've always wanted to get away." It was the beginning of a new war or the continuation of a series of older ones. The United States armies were killing people overseas. The United States police were killing people at home. It had been this way all of our lives. "I can't get this girl out of my mind," I said. "She's fifteen and she is making love to a man who is 7000 years old, who has seen every war and who will never die. She tries to leave him. She rises from the bed to walk outside but she always returns to lie on the bed again. She's caught in a time loop. She repeats these actions again and again."

"There's a multiplicity of selves in each of us that's beyond our capacity to realize, or unify," Tom said. "Every fraction of a second we live and breathe there's another whole self which radiates outward and exists forever there. You find yourself living in a billion different time frames at



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once. You can imagine any one of them but when you begin to believe it, you'll find you can't move."

You are the fifteen year old girl, only now you are a German soldier, a young Persian boy in the 8th century and you lay beside another boy as you tend your sheep and you feel his penis grow large and hot in your hand. You feel pride, confusion, fear, the dust blows a blanket into your eyes and you have to feel your way through the desert with your hands, your legs are lost to you and you fall in the street, a dozen bankers look the other way. You are every age at once, every sex, every race, you look up and the stars have moved in space. Imagine you have been hurt and it is not your fault. Imagine you are terrified of the dark. Imagine you milk a goat and spill the milk in the dust. Imagine someone loves you and you can't imagine why. Imagine you wait two million years without ever knowing what for.

Tom met the man fate intended him to love and be loved by three years before he died. I was there the morning after the night they met. We three had coffee and eggs and bread at 11:00 Sunday morning and spoke about ordinary things. There is a way two people can open the world for each other, a method by which the lover's essence is grasped and completed by the beloved which lies beyond the capacity of any third person to comprehend. When Ken went to get his car that morning in order to drive me home Tom and I waited at the entrance of the restaurant. "Because I needed him, I imagined him," Tom said to me. "And now I am afraid. Afraid that now that he is real, he will show me a world I have never imagined." I was watching a man feed beer to a dog on the sidewalk outside. I am ashamed to say now that at that time I did not understand.

When you were a child living with your family you did not know the world so you imagined it. Then later you moved to a place where there was no more family and you had to remember. Now you realize you never really knew anything about the world or family. All you really knew or had ever known about was buried in that ocean you had left when you emerged from the uterus and you begin to wonder if there was anything you have touched since that time that you have not imagined into being.

The immortal knew your face before he ever saw it. Felt your skin before he touched it. He could have drawn a map of all the cities he had ever lived in before he crossed the county line. Even this he knew he had known of previously. Even this Modesto motel room and the oppressive sky.

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When Tom was a boy living in Virginia he didn't sleep. There was something that scared him about the sky. He sat up at night in bed and read comic books. He was afraid of his dreams. His dreams were not a part of him. They were an evil influence, part of a further penetration of evil, further reaching than the banal ignorant smugness of a small Virginia college town. Beneath the sheets something whispered to him: Who writes the dreams that leave you cold? He sat up at night and watched the sky. "You must have slept sometime," I said. But he never admitted to it.

Later when sores covered Tom's body, Ken crawled into his lover's bed at night and put his arms around him and kissed his sores. "I never thought anybody would love me if I wasn't handsome," Tom said to me. "I never thought I could sleep like that." But there were dreams sometimes, dreams that indicated he must have been sleeping. He woke from one of these dreams in the early morning to the sound of his father's belt hissing through the air above his blankets. "Wake up you bastard," his father said. "So I know I must have been sleeping," Tom said to me. "What was he doing?" I asked. "He was a sadistic prick," Tom said. "He found the comic books I had to sneak into the house. I buried them in the yard. He found them and he decided to whip me." "What was he doing digging in the yard at two in the morning?" I asked. "I didn't think of that," Tom said.

"He was my father," Tom said. "I thought he knew everything."

"Let's say it happened this way," I said to Tom. "There is a fifteen year old girl and she follows a man who can't die because she doesn't know anything outside her body but she finds she can't bear his sadness so she spends the rest of her life reenacting the memory of his pain."

"That's an implosion of the process," Tom said. "One of those monstrous inversions from which Demons are born. His selves lack the energy of release and he must live within their presence at every moment. The din is terrible and there is nothing he does not know. Our tragedy lies in our not being able to remember ourselves. The immortal's lies in his not being able to forget."

"Do you want to die?" his sister asked Tom. "What a stupid question," he said to me. "Once you are born, you never want to die." We are always afraid, I said. "He wasn't afraid," Ken said later. "He didn't not want to die. He wanted to live."

"How did he get that strong?" I asked.

When Tom was 16 he took 500 micrograms of LSD and drove his mother's car into a patch of ice. He hit his head on the steering wheel and was knocked unconscious. His mother came to the hospital and sat by his

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bed for two days and three nights. When he woke, she asked him about the earring in his left ear. Her lips were tight. "I took it off when I came home," Tom said to me. "Only of course then I didn't have an opportunity. I thought, finally I will be able to tell her the truth. I felt relief." Tom's mother told him what kind of men wore earrings. "'Ruffians,' she said to me," Tom said. "'Circus people.' She thought I was running off to join the circus because my father had left us. She thought it was her fault. There was nothing I could say."

When I met Tom I was 19. We shared a flat in San Francisco. Tom came into my bedroom and smoked marijuana with me. "I know just how you feel," he said. "I was on the street in Houston for two years." "What happened?" I said. "I've never been so wanted," Tom said. "I never felt so important." "I'm getting tired of that drug," I said. The marijuana cigarette had gone out in Tom's hand and he brought it to his lips to relight.

"I know just how you feel," Tom said.

Imagine you are the girl on the bus only now you are standing on the sidewalk in Modesto, California. Directly above you is an arced sign spelling out the words Water, Wealth, Contentment, Health. You have no sense of irony or history and you have no way of knowing you are standing on the bones of a people slaughtered for that promise. The sunlight is hot and the freeway cuts through the valley and everything is open to you. Imagine you are Tom nine years after Stonewall and you are standing on Castro Street in San Francisco. There are men walking down the street with their arms around each other and a photograph of burning police cars in a camera store window. You are 22 years old and everything is open to you. You walk into a bar and order a beer.

A monk was coming out of Tom's hospital room as I approached it. He had a shaved head and wore Buddhist robes. "When I went to zazen," Tom told me, "I saw him working in the garden. He had been completely silent for six years. Then three months ago he began to speak." "What were his first words?" I asked. "I don't know," Tom said. "But he told me that when he decided to speak, it was two weeks until he could remember how." Tom looked for something among all the papers on his bed. I watched the pigeons fight each other for food on the windowsill. "Those birds never shut up," Tom said. "I can't sleep. Lisa?"

"Yes."

"You're Catholic, right?"

"Yes."



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"Would you do me a favour?"

"Of course."

"Would you get me some ice cream?"

His father came to visit him that day. Flew out from Texas and told his son he loved him. "My father bought my step-brother a rifle," Tom told me. "They go hunting together. They shoot animals." "Do you want that?" I asked. "I don't want to shoot animals," Tom said. "And I don't want to be with my father, but yes, I want that."

You have no desire to return to that motel room. There is something rotten about the man who will never die. You can smell it. You stand under the arch and put your hand under your skirt. You bring your fingers to your nose. It's a sour smell. You want to feel your body fall into a place of all possibilities. You walk toward the highway.

When Tom was 33 he called me and told me he had a dream. "They found me resting beside a stagnant stream 30 miles from the Caspian Sea. I was wearing a dashiki of gold threads and they thought I must be a king. They ran me through with their daggers and left me to die but I did not bleed so they became frightened and I was forced to rise and walk away before they began to worship me. I lost my memory and my clothes, I was put in prison. Later I lived on an island with people who spoke to the sun. Later I made candles, twelve hours a day I stirred pots of tallow, my chest and arms covered with hot grease. Later I left Europe. Later I built railroad tracks across North America. Then I played dice in a cave in the Rocky Mountains and won back my soul."

He was a gambler, the man who had lived for seven thousand years but gambling bored him. He couldn't predict the future but he watched the present unfold. Patterns emerged for him from the present with the surety of cells under a microscope. This gave him the ability to stay or hit with 99% accuracy and this made him rich. This gave him the ability to know where a woman wanted to be touched and how tenderly before she spoke it and this made him beloved. He wanted to lose almost as much as he wanted to die. You put your index and middle finger to his throat while you are poised naked over him. "You mean you came all this way for that?" you say. "Distance doesn't mean anything," he says.

I played cards with Tom four weeks before he died. We played Go Fish and he lost consciousness every few minutes. When he lay back on his



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pillows, I stood up, walked around the bedroom, went to the refrigerator, opened it, closed it, went to the bathroom and urinated, came back and tapped his shoulder, "Tom?" "Go fish," he said.

The man who will never die walks into an illegal gambling parlour in Turlock, California. There are three cowboys, a businessman and a woman at the poker table. He joins the game.

When Tom was 12 years old his father quit his family and his mother, who had never before tasted alcohol, drank a fifth of Southern Comfort and ran in circles in the front yard barking like a dog. Tom watched her from the living room window unable to move until the police came.

The seven thousand year old man loses the first hand on purpose. He wins the next without betting too high. The cocktail waitress asks him what he wants to drink. He always drinks tomato juice. Now he drinks vodka. He drinks three shots of vodka one after the other. He's hoping to disorient himself. He's hoping to lose.

When Tom was 18 he realized God loved him. He was sleeping in a trailer in Oklahoma City and he lay awake in that time between moon and sun and heard the wind chimes that hung from the trailer porch sound. He heard the wind stir the metal chimes and smelled the sage and felt an eternal love of which he was object and which he would never forget.

When I was 26 my lover was lying with another woman and I had no place to go. Tom took to me to his bed and put his arms around me. "We'll sleep now," he said.

The man who will never die has won again. He walks five miles to a farmworkers' camp. It is too late for fires and the people are asleep. They wear all their clothes under the blanket and dream huddled together. There are armed guards in the orchards. In the morning the sun will beat hard. He is suddenly tired and walks back to his motel room.

When Tom moved into my flat in San Francisco he brought three boxes of books on magic and paranormal phenomenon up the stairs. We sat on the floor and looked through his file of clippings on spontaneous combustion. "This happened in 1788," he said pulling one off the floor. "This woman went to a barn dance in Maryland, and she danced and danced and suddenly she burst into flame and within 20 seconds there was nothing

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left of her but her shoes, no bone, no flesh, nothing." "If the heat was so intense, why didn't it burn her shoes?" I asked. "That's the mystery," Tom said.

"There's no mystery to it," Ken said to me later. "People tell me I am to be commended for sacrificing so much, but what Tom gave me I couldn't have learned in a thousand lifetimes." "He loved you," I started to say. "Dignity," Ken said. "Courage, honour. If I had never known Tom I would never have known what those words meant."

You are standing under the overpass at Turlock. A sergeant from Fort Ord stops his car. As you drive along with him you drink from his bottle of Jack Daniels and feel his hand on your knee.

In the central valley helicopters fly over the fields and spray UFW organizers with malathion.

In government laboratories strange new viruses grow in petrie dishes.

In a vault of the office of the National Security Council lie blueprints for concentration camps built in New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada.

You are 15 and you are drunk with the power of your sex and your age. You feel the highway open to you like a woman to a man she desires. You are moving into your future. You want never to stop driving.

In a Modesto motel room a man sleeps who will never die.

In a hospice in Virginia Tom pulls the intravenous devices from his arm and whispers, "That's enough."

In San Francisco I sit at my office desk staring at the computer. Ken's voice over the phone says, "He loved you very much."

Imagine you can't earn any of this. Imagine an intelligence beyond any possible imagining that whispers to you while you sleep. Imagine you stand in a courtyard and spread your arms and a thousand birds arrange themselves at your feet. Imagine you spend your life pulling food out of the ground and still you go hungry. Imagine you are feeding a child and the child can't suck and she dies in your arms. Imagine you have to bury everyone you ever slept with. Imagine as you watch the white line of the freeway disappear beneath your wheels you dare to dream of freedom. Imagine you are a good man and still you die young. Imagine someone loves you and you've done nothing to deserve it. Imagine you are not alone.

*Neile Graham*

*for Ronald and Morgan Simison*

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## Tomb of the Eagles

I'm left-handed like her—the child  
who made this shard, who shaping a pot  
marked its rim with her thumbnail,

the etch etch etch of her hand on red clay  
then the vessel shattered with her grandparents'  
clean bones and with her own. Her knife fits

in my fingers perfect like bones.  
She carried it close. I can feel her hands fitting  
where my fingers do, rubbing the notched edge.

Morgan Simison's palms slide over a skull  
browned with 5,000 years of burial, her workworn hands  
trace the furrow where the bone bowed

under the slow press of a strap slung  
with the weight of fuel, food, child.  
A life of hard work for a simple meal.

But among the bones no sign of murder—  
survival enough violence for them all.  
The blunt affection of her hands on the skull.

She loves what she knows of these long-dead folk,  
the shape of the lands her husband and children till.  
The tomb her husband uncovered built of generations

of hands that knew these cliffs, this soil.  
The stories we can't guess, why the bones  
of sea-eagles mix with their dead.

I want to shape the child's name, whatever words  
she had for bowl and knife and the ragged sea  
below the cliffs of her tribe's tomb,

the seal swimming along among the rocks,  
whatever words she would use for the way my thumb  
fits into the prints of her own.



# The Art of Fiction

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Donald Anderson

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS. (Choose one)

1. Take in a museum series of a woman's face: six photos. In each enlarged black-and-white, the woman's face (a slip away from plainness) lures, broaches, transfixes, pricks. Beneath each view of the face, in this sequence, in the artist's pencil cursive: *Mother, Father, Sex, God, Death, Self*. And to introduce the photos:

*The camera trained on Lisa was controlled by her. I provided the six words in sealed envelopes. In a darkened room, Lisa confronted, six times, a word. At the moment Lisa possessed the image or memory by which she most embraced each faced word, she triggered the shutter:*

EXERCISE: Consider the effect of such an experiment for you, then compose six stories: *Mother, Father, Sex, God, Death, Self*.

EXTRA CREDIT: Snap/Develop the photos. Cope.

HELPFUL HINT: Memory is Imagination.

PROBLEM: Memory is Imagination.

2. Flex critically. Pen an essay embracing the vast terrain of story. Consider, as a minimum, who you or we are—any of us—to suppose to slip the summons of time, failure, tribe, success, panic, decent want, insanity, death, fashion, entitlement, lucidity, quiddity, impotence, license, humility, blood, shame, arrival, unsettled grief, vision, terror, perfidy, loss, fortune, pity, art, error, heaven, truth—*mutinous* truth, sympathy, surrender, avoidance, damage, history, sperm, agency, tallying competition, self-pitying self-importance, glamour, turbulence, egg, chaos, inaction, imploration, tyranny, defiance, mask, horror, intention, invention, rites, discovery, recovery, sweet order, troth, ire, murk, pox, sorrow, clemency, inoculation, viscissitude, love? Be sure to include a thesis statement.

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3. Or, hell, write a story about your dog:
- a. Your dead dog.
  - b. When your father came home, Naps was under the tire (the car still in neutral, brakes off).
  - c. Because, even with your father's help, you couldn't push the dead car up the incline off Naps, so your father flagged down a neighbour.
  - d. Because when the neighbour nudged his gas to nudge your father's car off Naps, his bumper rode up over your father's, locked, doubled the car's rear weight.
  - e. Because you had planned to recharge the battery by revving the car (by driving it out past the *Tastee-Freeez*, then back).
  - f. Because you had a buck in your pants for gas.
  - g. THE DOG YOU CRUSHED WITH YOUR FATHER'S CAR.
  - h. Because you planned to coast the car down the incline of your street (switching the key, popping the clutch) to start it.
  - i. Because as the battery bled, you twisted up the volume (heavy treble, light bass).
  - j. Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, The Big Bopper (*Oh, Baby, you KNOW what I like!*).
  - k. Because, long tuned to the yowl of the faulty starter, what reason had Naps to scramble?
  - l. The car (your father's, not your neighbour's): a 1949 green Hudson Hornet.
  - m. White whitewalls as wide as your palm.
  - n. As wide and white as your palm.
  - o.

*Mark Cochrane*

*two poems*

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## Mapplethorpe

Paint my lips. Airbrush my jawbone with talcum, my  
jawbone is shaven raw-blue. Blush me, rouge me,  
feather my scrolled wings of hair. I say to my wife.  
I say, make me over like Mapplethorpe, lips open &  
vulnerable. I say, a man like one idea of a woman.  
Make me that. Later let me preen in leather, tough,  
the same angle, but for now I pout into your f-stop.  
Don't stop. Do me like that, yeah, like Mapplethorpe.  
Closer now, cheeks lavender and brows blue, garish as  
our ancestors, faces of baboons. Come to me with eyes  
lined, lashes black, your broad gorgeous shoulders,  
your freckled muscular neck. Let a man & a woman kiss  
a woman & a man. Two palettes, & smudge, pigments &  
oils: a diptych. There is gender all over our faces,  
mixed up & blended over all of our faces & boy, boy am  
I, am I ever, boy am I ever in love.

# Society for the Preservation

Everything is used up, the thrush  
hits the picture window, it's  
broken inside, its  
head out of joint, its  
pincushion body of snapped bones  
in the shoebox. There is no soil  
we have not squeezed thru our fingers,  
the water in this river  
has been used before, even in this country  
nothing is itself, the freeway crazy with  
a car pulling a car  
on a trailer, fishtailing, into the ditch  
right in front, we could have died.  
Our son in his carseat  
or you, running along the medium  
for help, at the convenience store, exit  
73, alerting the RCMP then waiting  
for a ferry. To cross the river to Mission,  
river of water that has been used before,  
passed thru bodies & leached thru culverts  
under roads to the SPCA,  
water that suspends a ferry of cars  
above the sludge  
with a broken thrush in a shoebox  
on the seat beside our son, its rustle  
in that darkness as we rush, we rush.



Patricia Young

two poems

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## The Herb Garden

The smell of cilantro filled the woman with desire  
so fierce and sudden she'd drop to her knees.

Her husband, a passionate man, appreciated  
the fine effect the scent of herbs had on his wife, especially  
basil. He always insisted *she* pick the leaves  
necessary for the evening salad.

In time, though, the man was exhausted.  
He complained that this wife was too  
demanding, he suggested she grow potatoes or corn.

The woman planted anise.

By late summer the plant had reached its full  
and umbelliferous height. Ah, she sighed,  
one evening, breathing the aromatic seeds.  
The woman called for her husband  
to join her in the garden but he closed  
the window and continued to read an instructive manual  
on car maintenance.

*Another marriage bites the dust*, people mutter  
when they hear this little story but I say, wait—

the woman is walking into the room  
where her husband's fallen asleep on the couch.  
He is opening his eyes and the birds  
on her dressing gown are singing in plum trees.

It is the beginning of time  
and you can tell just by looking at their faces—  
unhappiness is the one thing that has not been invented.

# 19th Century American Greenhouses

I turn the book's pages, not actually  
reading the words and then  
the words begin to take shape:  
*tomato, onion, rose.*

I read about the stacks of plate  
negatives that served  
no purpose until 19th century nurserymen  
began to use them to construct  
glass walls. And now I am  
stumbling across memory—

you are above me, beneath me, yes, it is your astonished  
face I have captured with my photographer's eye.

The river is brown, we've thrown off  
our coats and though it's December  
the taste of that first kiss  
and the sun's freakish  
warmth persuades us to pass  
from shadow to light. Was it that day  
or some other when you first spoke  
of the unsmiling soldiers

posed in full uniform? After  
we'd kicked off our winter boots  
that you began speaking of glass  
negatives, thousands  
bought after the Civil War?  
Bought cheap and fitted side by side  
in long, wooden frames so that  
for years afterwards  
heat shimmered off acres of roofs.  
*Death feeding life,*

you said, or something like it. You said  
the thought of those smoky faces  
gazing down on the seedlings  
beneath them so satisfied  
something within you  
that you would not  
go near it, you'd let it stand  
in your mind, untouched as the bodies  
of those boys before they collided  
with bayonet and history.

# Wild Dogs

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*Patrick Roscoe*

During hot, still afternoons, when only wasps disturbed the glassy silence, Lily picked ticks off our dog. On the hard, shaded dirt to the east of the house, beneath the bougainvillea, she held Ginger tightly between her legs and worked fingers through the secret places of his coat. Below his neck, beneath the flaps of his ears, and among the pits of his legs she encountered ticks swollen fat with blood. These she pinched between a finger and a thumb until the soft, tight skin of the sac burst and Ginger's blood spurted over her hands. Picking up the can of tick powder, Lily sprinkled white snow where the pest had nestled; it was supposed to discourage further unwelcome visitors. But a hundred more ticks would fasten to Ginger during his journeys through the brush tomorrow; there were always more than Lily could kill, especially during dry season. Already our dog squirmed unhappily, restlessly. Dissatisfied with our company, he was forever trotting from sight, losing us easily if we tried to follow. Lily told me that Ginger went in search of his tail, which had been chopped off shortly after his birth as a boxer pup. ("It's the custom," our father, Mitch, informed us. "Something people do," he added weakly, when our puzzled faces requested a better explanation.) Only the stump of a tail remained, scarcely enough to wag. One day Ginger would return home with his missing tail between his teeth—instead of the usual rats and snakes. Perhaps then he would become our loyal companion, our faithful friend, no longer prone to long disappearances and battles with other dogs which left his torn ears permanent attractions for flies. "They'll drink all his blood," Lily told me, not looking up from Ginger's coat. Lips pressed tightly together, she declined my invitation that we venture down the hill to the main road, where the sugar man sold his cane. He would give us as much as we could carry if we sang something from *Mary Poppins*; all afternoon we could chew the sweet, stringy cane he peeled with his big machete, spit out a trail of exhausted pulp to show where we had been, like Hansel and Gretel in the haunted forest. Still ignoring me, Lily moved her thin, freckled face nearer our dog's coat. She didn't look up when a ripe pawpaw fell with a splitting thud from a nearby tree; within ten minutes its sweet meat would swarm with hun-



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gry insects feeding so ravenously you could almost hear the click of small, sharp teeth. Now Lily suddenly loosened her legs and clapped her hands three times near Ginger's ears, loudly. He bounded away. My sister held blood-stained hands up to the sky, squinted at them with satisfaction. With broad, sweeping strokes she painted her face with crosses; the marks were nearly the same colour as the earth beneath us. After the blood dried, Lily would have to be careful not to smile, or it would crack.

Our dreamy father had few rules, and these were laxly enforced. Mitch forgot to check the correspondence lessons we were supposed to do in the morning, and he wouldn't remember bedtime and brushing teeth and letters to our mother. Another overlooked law was that we three children were supposed to stay together. "There's strength in numbers," Mitch explained. That we did play together, MJ and Lily and I, was strictly due to necessity, for there were no other children at the college—except for black ones who sang taunting rhymes to our backs, or threw bowls of white mush in our faces if we were foolish enough to get too close. Mitch encouraged us to explore as far and wide as we could, and didn't express fear for our safety as long as we were home before dark. "Where did you go and what did you see today?" he would ask eagerly in the evening, when night spread around the house and things concealed during day came out to prowl beyond the door. We looked at each other cautiously, chose with care what we could safely tell Mitch. While we often did move across that disturbing landscape as a trio, there were many days when MJ had to lie upon his bed with tightly closed eyes. His head hurt. You could see veins beneath his brow beat with blood angrily trying to get out. When he came home from teaching, Mitch would massage MJ's temples, rub strong fingers into his eldest son's scalp. "It's just the heat," Mitch would say. "It's nothing more than that." With MJ waiting to heal and rise, Lily lost loyalty to our broken group. I would turn to see her nearly out of sight already, one of the old, pleated skirts donated by the nuns swished by her quickly striding legs. If I tried to follow, she would simply walk more swiftly; if I got in her way, she would push me aside—not meanly, but efficiently, as you brush away a branch or vine that blocks your path. I never knew where Lily went alone; upon returning, she would not tell me, and deflected Mitch's inquiries neatly. I suspected she followed the trail above the college, that through jungle led to where the river roared between rocks. Up there the air was thin and cool, an element that to me felt alien, not quite suitable for human lungs. And there birds cried too loudly, flowers bloomed too boldly, the jungle was too thick. Lily met Ginger by the river, I thought; together they searched for something concealed along its bank. They would be home

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when they were hungry, they would be home before dark. I never feared Lily would become lost up in the jungle; she was eleven, two years older than me, and I always thought her smart and strong enough to find the way back down to us. And I believed that like Ginger she went in search of something missing, an essential part of herself chopped off shortly after birth. What was it Lily hunted during those slow afternoons, when at the house below the only sounds were the ancient gardener's machete striking stones in the yard, the houseboy's croon as he wrung dripping clothes behind the kitchen, the whimper of MJ from his dim, painful room? What would Lily bear between her teeth when she returned to view?

I'm sure Mitch gave us a dog with the best intentions. "I had one when I was a boy," he said, and then we heard once more about his tough, hardy Regina youth. Probably Mitch held in his head some clear, focused photograph of three children frolicking with a happy pet. Caring for their dog, the children would learn responsibility; in turn, he would act as comrade and comforter, and strengthen their number. Mitch didn't seem to notice that from the start our attention to Ginger was not reciprocated; we were not that interesting or necessary to our dog. We couldn't teach him to fetch or sit up or roll over and play dead. "He's getting big," Mitch observed happily, as within the door Ginger lifted his head at the sound of wild dogs in the distance. They bayed at a rough beast who slouched through the night. Our dog scratched to be let out, insisted with claws until we had to give in and open the door. Slinking away, he would return in morning smelling of something rotten, bad. Lily would disregard the stink, pick more ticks from his coat, try to brush it smooth. Perhaps things would have been different in a blander setting, without the scent of wild blood to lure our dog from us. Mitch's hopeful vision might have unfolded more perfectly against a background of neat lawns and fences, tidy sidewalks and maple trees. It was our father's fatal tendency to disregard the landscape upon which he set his fantasies. And to believe that everything was all right as long as we were home before dark.

During those years Lily was taller than MJ and me, with hair hacked off by Mitch in the shape of a bowl. (He enjoyed playing barber, liked to shave MJ's and mine and his own head right to the scalp, pronounced pleasure in the cool results.) My sister's face was sharp, her new teeth had grown in crooked, scabs always decorated her knees. I was not aware that girls played dolls and house, or dressed up in their mothers' clothes: Lily didn't do these things, and never mentioned them. She liked to swim and run and climb the tops of trees. She enjoyed silent activities,



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such as our visits to Father Joe, the college naturalist, who kept cages of snakes and guinea pigs. He fed the latter to the former. The biggest snake—a sly, old boa—didn't like to eat in front of curious children. You had to be very still and patient to catch him strike at the guinea pig shivering at the far side of the cage. Lily looked hard as with a gulp he swallowed it whole. Later I would always envision her studying intensely something right before her eyes, while MJ and I had to turn away. It seems to me that I was usually watching Lily rather than whatever lay before us; she saw for all of us, I think. When at the prison farm they showed us how a cow was killed then skinned, Lily's eyes widened slightly, then quickly narrowed again, shutting the sight inside herself. Later, attempting to butcher the beef back in our kitchen, Mitch scratched his head at the puzzle of sides and quarters, waved the saw in the air, splashed in pools of blood. Lily worked alongside him; she pointed and advised. From where I hovered with MJ in the doorway, I thought I saw her nostrils quiver, as she breathed in deeply the stench of intestine, the stink of death.

While MJ would sometimes tell stories about where we had lived before Africa and what had happened to us there, Lily refused to discuss the past, and showed no interest in anything not visible in the present either. MJ spoke about the dancing goat on the island in Greece and the little one-armed girl in Spain; he described our mother, Ardis, who was far away in Canada. "She has blonde hair and red lips," MJ mused again, while without a word Lily wandered from our secret place beneath the lemon tree. We found her occupied with an army of marching ants. Their file was endless and perfectly neat; two by two they moved with determination toward some destination we could only fathom. You could stir them with a stick or dump pails of water on them, but this interrupted their progress for only the few seconds it took to scramble back into rank. MJ said the ants were marching home. I said maybe they were lost. Lily said they were going to war. We agreed that the ants could strip the flesh from a large beast's frame in seconds. With the blink of an eye bones were picked as clean as a whistle.

"The nuns!" MJ cried in alarm, too late. Before we could escape, a dozen of the Dutch sisters surrounded us; they always seemed to appear almost out of nowhere, and in the most unlikely locations. We would see them filing solemnly across the golf course of the Morogoro Country Club early in morning, or clustered in the open back of a pick up whirling down the road. Moving with surprising swiftiness, they encircled us again, with black habits flapping like huge wings in our faces. For a long time we

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couldn't distinguish one nun from another; their costume lent them anonymity. Gradually we learned that Sister Bridgit was tall and thin, Sister Mary a short and plump, Sister Elsa always flushed, and so on. They nodded and clucked and patted our heads with concern; in guttural Dutch they discussed us between themselves, seeming to search for a solution to a difficult problem. Then they would attempt several tentative sentences of severely accented English we could barely understand. "By the sea of Galilea," I thought Sister Anna said. MJ said they were telling us to prepare for the Second Coming. Lily didn't like the nuns; she wouldn't look at them. From beneath their robes, like magicians, they pulled skirts and blouses sent from Holland to clothe a little black girl. Lily accepted these gifts rudely, glaring at the ground. Finally the nuns would sigh, pat our heads once more, then turn toward their convent at the highest point of the college, where the jungle began. Sometimes, on our way exploring, we passed the nunnery and heard voices raised sweetly in hymn. Rather than soothe, the song seemed to add a jarring note to the setting, as if there were nothing in this air to receive such words of praise and thanks.

During our third year in Tanzania, when Lily turned twelve, her breasts began to grow. They irritated her. She picked constantly at the front of her blouse, lifting cloth that chafed the sensitive spots. This reminded me of the way Ginger shook his head violently in a vain attempt to banish flies clustered upon his bloody ears. They wouldn't heal; he insisted upon scratching them while still raw with the claws of a hind leg. Leaving the houseboy to feed our dog, we went on safari several times during the first years in Morogoro, and on another occasion made a longer trip when Mitch suddenly decided it was necessary for us to see the pyramids and Sphinx without delay. The first time we returned home, Ginger was not waiting for us, and showed up only three days later; the second time, he was gone two weeks. After that he came around less and less frequently, and between visits I would forget the shape of his nose, the colour of his eyes. Sometimes he came home to eat; sometimes we saw him in the distance, among the pack of wild dogs that made wide-ranging expeditions through the area. They ran in a loose cluster, noses near the ground, direction determined by invisible forces, snarling at each other. Now Ginger would not come when called; he had forgotten his name. "Leave him alone," said Lily, turning away. "It was a stupid name anyway. He's not the colour of ginger at all." Though Mitch didn't seem to realise that our dog was increasingly absent, he did appear to sense that somehow things were not the same for us. Something had changed; he tried to put a finger on it. "Do you have everything you



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need?" he once asked abruptly. He seemed less confident that he held just the right solution to anything like a wild card up his sleeve, and in evening inquired less brightly about where we had been that day. Lily especially made him uneasy. He suggested she pay visits to Prima, the chic young East Indian woman who lived in the house below ours. Lily stared at him. "What for?" she finally asked. For several moments Mitch rubbed his head, glanced at his watch, hummed. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Chess!" he exclaimed. "Which of you kids thinks he's smart enough to beat the old man?"

People began to say the wild dogs were getting out of hand. Their pack grew larger. No longer skulking warily at a safe distance from humans, they became bolder, more threatening. All night they would circle and howl around a certain house, trapping its sleepless inhabitants inside. They killed chickens in the village by the college. More than actual damage or harm, they caused disturbance, fear. "Rabies," it was muttered. The Africans wanted to get rid of the wild dogs with axes and machetes. They believed them evil spirits risen from centuries of tortured sleep. They believed them demons escaped from nightmare. One night we listened to the wild dogs tear apart Prima's pet monkey. "Go back to sleep," said Mitch, a black shape in our bedroom door. The monkey's screams died; MJ moaned in his bed between Lily's and mine. His headaches were worse, though the Morogoro doctor, a proud graduate of the Bombay Institute of Dental Hygiene, had promised he would grow out of them. Lily slipped from bed and stood before the window, face pressed against the mesh screen that was supposed to keep our insects and snakes. "What are you doing?" I asked. Lily's nightdress, another gift from the good Dutch nuns, was too short around her thin, scratched legs. It gleamed in the darkness. "Where are you going?" I whispered, as Lily's bare feet padded from the room. I heard the kitchen door click open, then shut. In my safe, hot bed I fell asleep, while outside Lily roamed in search of secrets contained in the carcass of a mutilated monkey. I dreamed I saw her eyes burning yellow in the darkness, her mouth frothing white, her nose smeared thickly with blood.

What did I see, what did I dream? Later I would never know for certain if I ever really saw Lily poised at the edge of the sisal field below the college, a circle of wild dogs dancing around her, leaping up to snap at her face. Back straight and arms folded across her chest, she stood still amid the whirling beasts. Did her lips move? Was she speaking to the dogs? All at once she turned on her heels and ran from the writhing ring. The dogs took after her, barking madly; they were hunting Lily or they were fol-

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lowing Lily. The pack entered the sisal that grew taller than my sister. All I could see was a dense green field, with no hint what it contained, unfolding still and calm before me. Troubling my eyes.

Finally we returned to Canada and to our mother, who was able to stay out of the clinic if she took her Lithium. None of us spoke much about Morogoro, and Mitch seemed disappointed that we were not grateful for the opportunity for exotic experience he had given us. His efforts to settle down in the small B.C. town were half-hearted at best; his temper became uncharacteristically short and sharp; in five years he would go away again, this time alone, this time for good. Meanwhile, Lily refused to remember anything about Africa; she would barely admit we had lived there at all. In Brale, B.C., my sister said she couldn't recall our chameleon with the leash of string around its neck or our hunts for frogs in the gutters above the college church. Or seeing the Milky Way creamed above the Serengetti, when in the middle of a night drive home Mitch stopped the car and insisted we get out to view the sky. "The stars are closer when you're in Africa," he told us. I still believe that, as I continue to believe many of my father's patent untruths. But Lily denied knowledge of the shape a baobab forms against the sky and the shriek of a colobus monkey when you pass through the jungle below. In Brale she wore a disguise of make up and drank home-made wine with Italian boys down by the Columbia River. Now her hair was long, covering her eyes. From beneath bangs Lily watched Ardis warily, sniffed at our mother from safe distance, tried to determine if this stranger posed danger. "Go back to the loony bin where you belong," she snarled, when Ardis said she must be home before dark. Our mother retreated behind the closed door of her room again; in the basement MJ watched another hour of TV. Despite a battery of tests and medications, his headaches were never diagnosed or treated with success; clearly they were due to something more than just the heat. MJ was unable to heal and rise; he couldn't attend high school frequently enough to graduate. At nineteen he disappeared on his way to Montreal, where he was headed to look for work. I think he couldn't stand for us to see the veins still throbbing with angry blood beneath his brow. He needed to lose Africa, to lose us. I continued to believe that a dark continent lay hidden just beneath our skin; with a sharp knife you could peel away a layer to discover the rich taste of mango, the smells of charcoal and dust and rotting fruit, the mocking laughter of hyenas in the night.

Perhaps Lily was searching for these things when she used the razor on herself. By this time—like MJ, like Mitch—I had left behind the Brale

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house beneath the reeling crows, beneath white powder sprinkling through the sky. We went our separate ways, gave up on the promise that there is safety in numbers. Only Ardis remained behind when Lily entered the psychiatric wing of the regional hospital. ("Jesus," Mitch wrote me in Morocco. "We should have the family name engraved on a door of the place.") During the next three years, while Lily was silent, I sometimes thought of Ginger. By the time we left Morogoro he was no longer ours; now he was one of the wild dogs. He never came to the house of cement blocks even to eat, and would have sunk teeth into our hands if we had reached out to pet him. Once we heard disease had swept through the pack of dogs; for a while their number did seem smaller, then they appeared as many as before. Several times, in the car, we might have seen Ginger loping along the ditch beside the main road. We weren't sure. I thought yes; Lily disagreed. "He's dead," she said. "He died a long time ago. He's not coming back." When I finally heard from Lily, she said she had found Jesus; He had enabled her to leave the clinic at last. I couldn't help but think of Jesus wandering lost amid the bamboo shoots beside the Ngong River, impractical white robes tangled in vines and roots, waiting for Lily to find Him and to bring Him home before dark. My sister sent me poorly printed religious tracts and urged me to become saved before it was too late. Through post cards he mailed me from Thailand and Indonesia and Tibet, I understood that Mitch also received warnings of a Second Coming. In Morocco today skeletons of starved dogs haunt my step, whine in my ear; obscurely shaped icons crowd the market. The mosque's bell clangs hollowly just before dusk; below my balcony the streets suddenly fill with beings scurrying home before dark. Night creeps into the alleys of El Jadida, then descends upon the barren desert beyond. Stars rise in the sky. "They're closer when you're in Africa," I used to write to Lily. But she refused to visit me in El Jadida; she remained in Brale with Ardis and Jesus and medication. Beside the cold, swift river they passed calm years, I gather, made up of cleaning and dusting and other careful rituals. The last time I heard from Lily she enclosed a photograph of herself. I couldn't recognize this woman with puffy face devoid of freckles, with hair pinned into a neat bun, with untroubled eyes. Lily looked without smiling into the camera, as if afraid her face would crack. As if parting her lips would allow a wild dog's howl to swell the air.



# Contributors

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**Heather Adair** will be a graduating student from Emily Carr School of Art and Design. She lives in Vancouver and is a sculptor and photographer.

**Donald Anderson** directs Creative Writing at the United States Air Force Academy. He is editor of the journal *War, Literature, and the Arts*. His fiction has appeared in a number of journals, including *The North American Review* and *Fiction International*.

**April Bulmer** is a graduate student in the faculty of Divinity at Trinity College, Toronto. She holds an M.A. in Creative Writing from Concordia University. Her book of poetry, *A Salve For Every Sore*, was published by Cormorant Books in 1991.

**Mark Cochrane's** poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Poetry Canada Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *The Capilano Review*, and *The Moosehead Anthology*. His work last appeared in *PRISM* 31:1.

**Cynthia Flood's** two collections of short fiction are *The Animals in their Elements* and *My Father Took a Cake to France* (Talonbooks, 1987 and 1992). In 1990 she won the Journey Prize. "The Usual Accomplishments" is one of a linked sequence of short stories, to be titled *A Civil Plantation*.

**Neile Graham** is a Canadian writer currently living in Seattle, Washington. She has published poems and reviews in various Canadian and American magazines, including *Canadian Literature* and *Quarry*. A second collection of poems, *Spells for Clear Vision*, is due from Brick Books in Fall, 1994.

**David Hart** lives in Birmingham, England, and works part-time for the West Midlands Regional Arts Board. He started the Poetry Squantum at the Hay on Wye Literature Festival and edited the documentary book of the first one, *Border Country* (Wood Wind, 1991). He's been an Anglican priest and a drama critic.

**C.E. Hull** is an Australian poet and artist. She has been published in magazines and anthologies in Australia, Canada, U.S.A., India, and the U.K. She is enrolled in a Master of Arts course at Deakin University (VIC) and her first book of poetry, *In The Dog Box of Summer*, will be published by Penguin Australia this year.

**Will Harvey** grew up in Clarkson, Ontario, where the sport was box lacrosse. He lives now near the Grand River with Greta and Bon, girdog and tomcat.

**Lisa Daus Neville** is a novelist and story writer from California. She is currently living in Boulder, Colorado, where she is completing her novel *The Meaning of Relativity*.



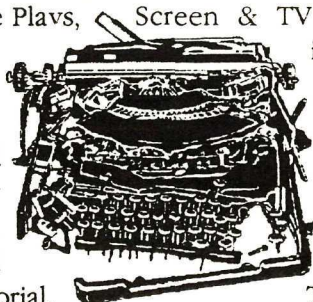
**Patrick Roscoe** is the author of two collections of short stories, *Birthmarks* (Penguin Canada, 1990) and *Beneath the Western Slopes* (Stoddart, 1987); most recently, he published the novel *God's Peculiar Care* (Viking Penguin, 1991). His fiction has been widely published, and received many awards.

**Carolyn Marie Souaid** is a poet living in Montreal. She is currently working toward a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at Concordia University. Her work has appeared in several Canadian periodicals.

**Patricia Young's** most recent book is *More Watery Still* (Anansi, 1993). She recently won the League of Canadian Poets 1993 National Poetry Contest.

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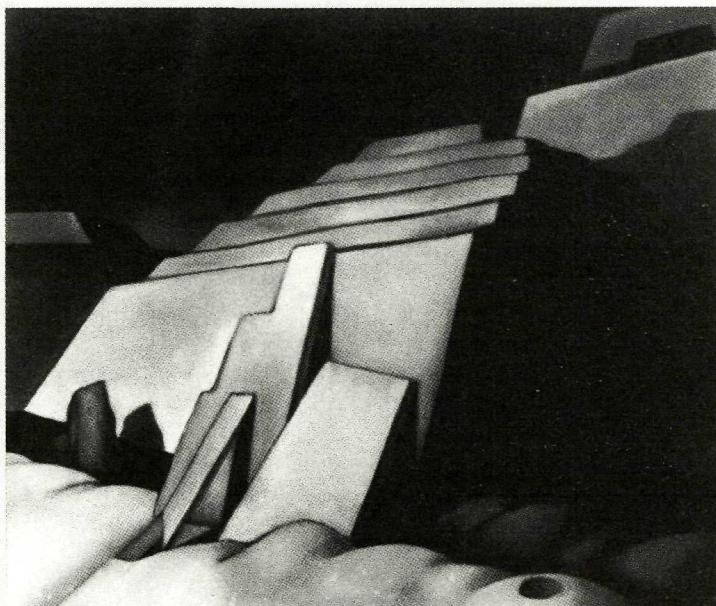
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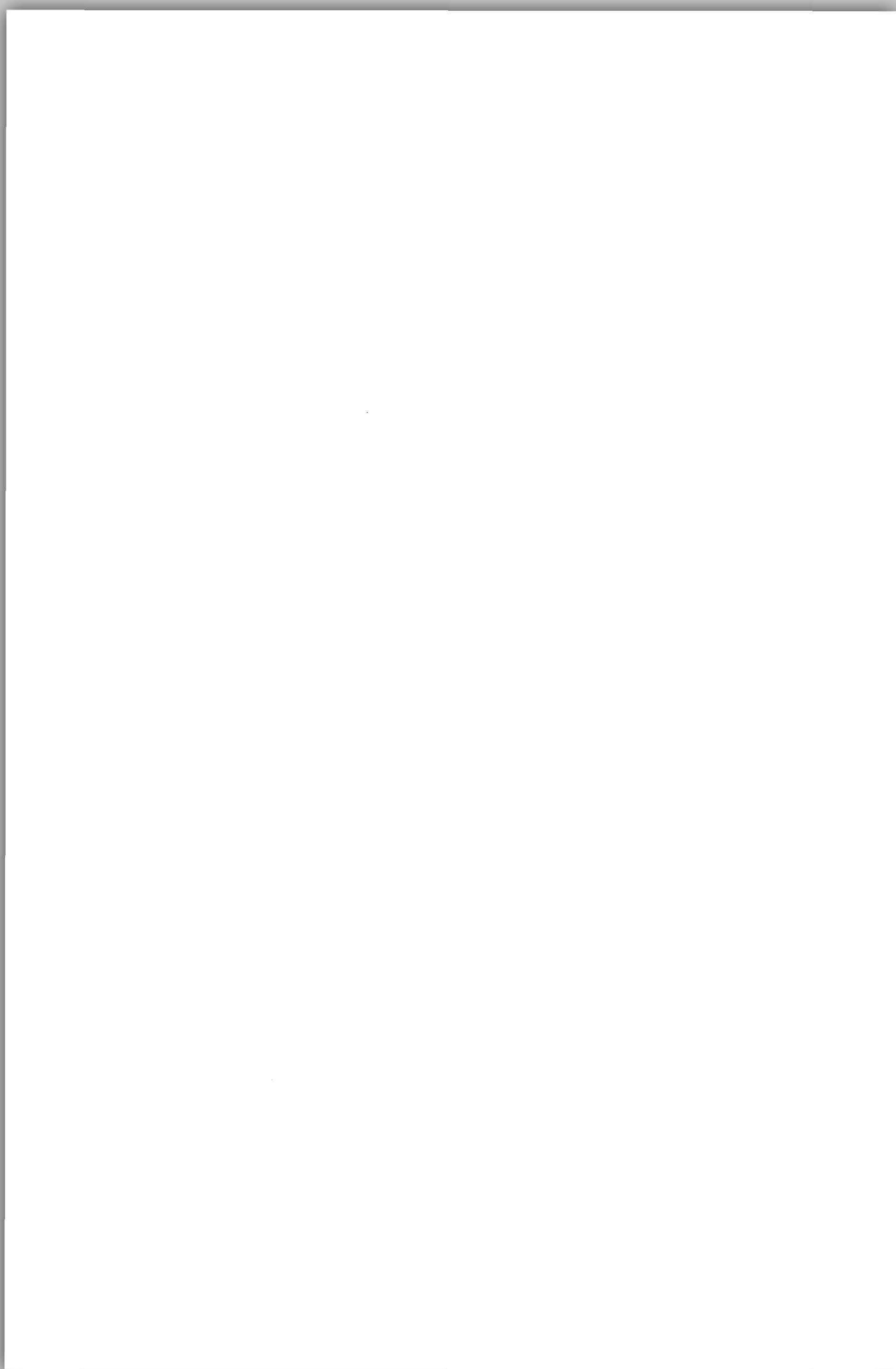
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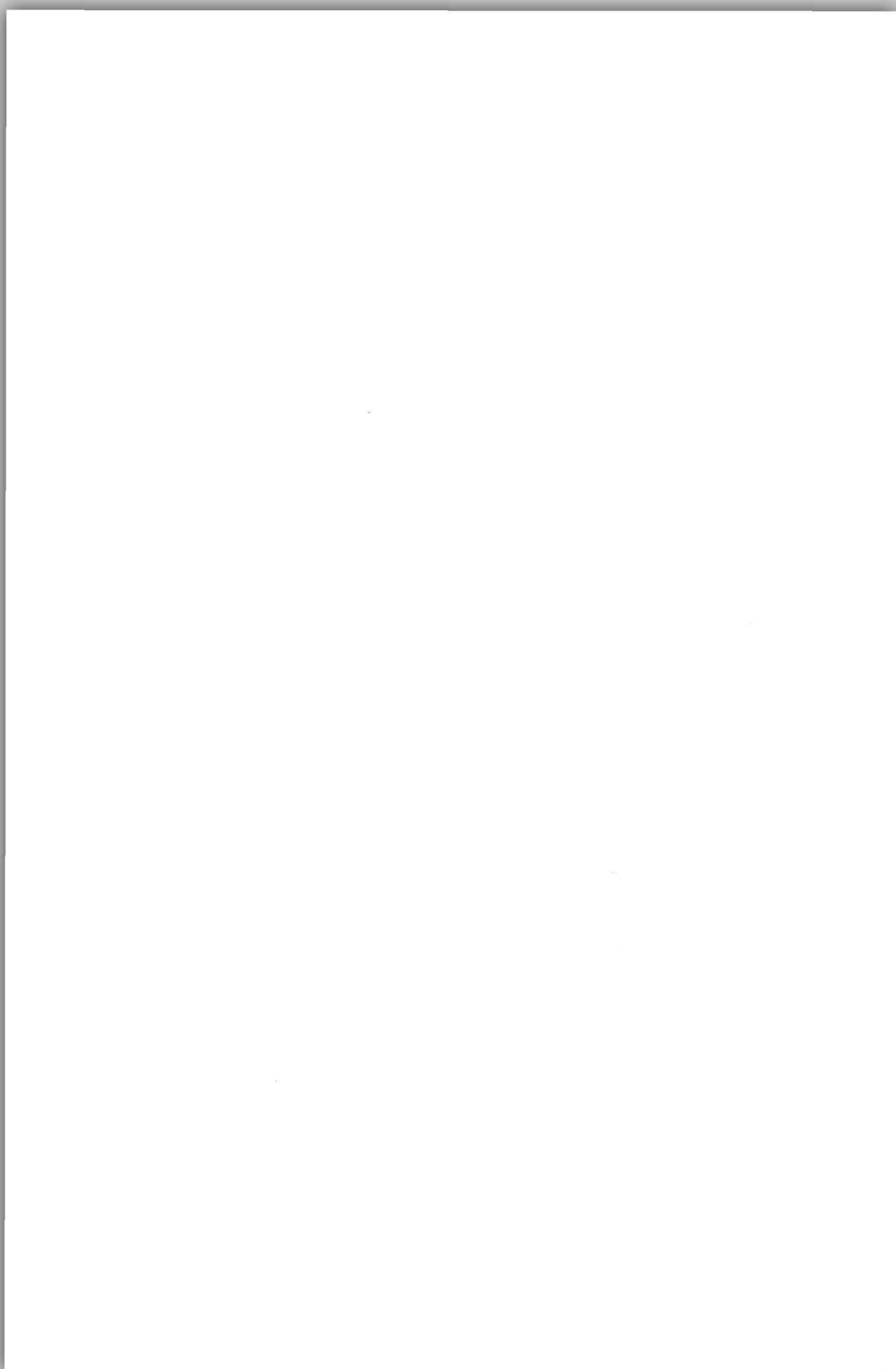
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