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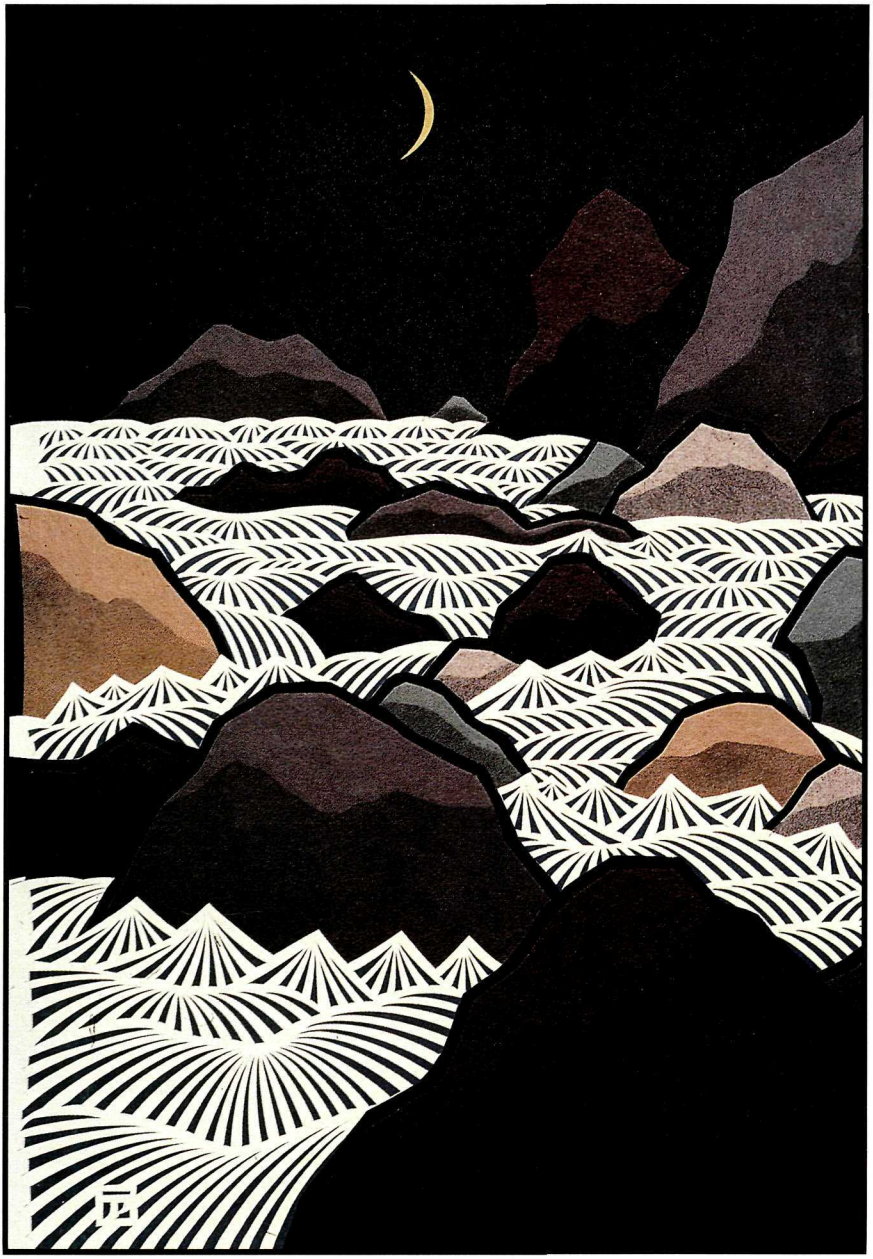

1990 Fiction Contest Winners

PRISM *international*

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$2000 Prize: **Steven Heighton**, Kingston, Ontario, Canada
"Five Paintings of the New Japan"

$200 Prize: **Danuta Gleed**, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
"Evening in Paris"

$200 Prize: **Michael C. Kenyon**, Pender Island, B.C., Canada
"Olive Oyl Drives Home"

$200 Prize: **Ingrid Macdonald**, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
"Travelling West"

$200 Prize: **Nighat Majid**, Tucson, Arizona, United States
"Asma"

$200 Prize: **Diza Sauers**, Tucson, Arizona, United States
"Temples"

1990 FINALISTS

Colette Gagnon, Canada	"Pick Up"
Zsuzsi Gartner, Canada	"They Buried My Grandmother Without Any Clothes On"
J.A. Hamilton, Canada	"Too Young Boys"
Zoe Landale, Canada	"Some Things Wrong"
Brian C. Russo, United States	"Dimiyati's Curse"

We would like to extend a special thank you to Jane Rule, this year's final judge and to Pierre A. Stolte, our diligent contest manager.

Five Paintings of the New Japan

Steven Heighton

A National Gallery

I. Sunflowers

I was the first foreigner to wait tables in the *Yumei no ato*. Summer enrollment was down at the English school where I taught so I needed to earn some extra money, and since I'd been eating at the restaurant on and off for months it was the first place I thought of applying. It was a small establishment built just after the war in a bombed-out section of the city, but when I saw it the area was studded with bank towers, slick boutiques, coffee shops and flourishing bars and the *Yumei no ato* was one of the oldest and most venerable places around. I was there most of the summer and I wish I could go back. I heard the other day from Nori, the dishwasher, who works part-time now in a camera store, that our ex-boss Mr Onishi has just fought and lost a battle with cancer.

"We have problems here every summer," Mr Onishi sighed during my interview, "with a foreign tourist people." He peered up at me from behind his desk, two shadowy half-moons drooping under his eyes. "Especially the Americans. If I hire you, you can deal to them."

"With them," I said automatically.

"You have experienced waitering?"

"A little," I lied.

"You understand Japanese?"

"I took a course."

"Say something to me in Japanese."

I froze for a moment, then was ambushed by a phrase from my primer.

"*Niwa ni wa furu-ike ga arimasu.*"

"In the garden," translated Mr Onishi, "there is an old pond."

I stared abjectly at his bald patch.

"You cannot say a sentence more difficult than that?"

I told Mr Onishi it was a beginner's course. He glanced up at me and ran his fingers through a greying Vandyke beard.

"How well do you know the Japanese cuisine?"

"Not so well," I answered in a light bantering tone that I hoped would disarm him, "but I know what I like."

He frowned and checked his watch, then darted a glance at the bank calendar on the wall by his desk.

"Morinaga speaks a little English," he said. "He will be your trainer. Tomorrow at 1600 hours you start."

"You won't be sorry, sir," I told him.

"I shall exploit you," he said, "until someone more qualified applies."

*

Nori Morinaga leaned against the steam table and picked his nose with the languid, luxurious gestures of an epicure enjoying an after-dinner cigar. He was the biggest Japanese I'd ever seen and the coke-bottle glasses perched above his huge nose seemed comically small.

"Ah, *gaijin-san*!" he exclaimed as he saw me, collecting himself and inflating to his full height. "Welcome in! Hail fellow well-hung!"

I wondered if I'd heard him correctly.

"It gives me great pressure!"

I had. I had.

Nori Morinaga offered me his hand at the same moment I tried to bow. Nervously we grinned at each other, then began to laugh. He was a full head taller than I was, burly as a linebacker but prematurely hunched as if stooping in doorways and under low ceilings had already affected his spine. He couldn't have been over twenty-five. His hair was brush-cut like a Marine's and when he spoke English his voice and manner seemed earnest and irreverent at the same time.

"Onishi-San tells me I will help *throw you the ropes*," he chuckled. "Ah, I like that expression. Do you know it? I study English at the University but the *gaijin-sensei* always says Japanese students must be more idiomatic so I picked up this book"—his giant hand brandished a thick paperback—"and I study it *like a rat out of hell.*"

He grinned enigmatically, then giggled. I couldn't tell if he was serious or making fun of me.

Nori pronounced his idiomatic gleanings with savage enthusiasm, his magnified eyes widening and big shoulders bunching for emphasis as if to ensure his scholarship did not pass unseen. I took the book and examined it: a dog-eared, discount edition of UP-TO-DATE ENGLISH PHRASES FOR JAPANESE STUDENTS—in the 1955 edition.

"We open in an hour," he said. "We are *oppressed for time*. Come on, *I'm going to show you what's what.*"

Situated in a basement, under a popular *karaoke* bar, the *Yumei no ato*'s two small rooms were dimly lit and the atmosphere under the low ceiling was damp and cool, as in an air-raid shelter or submarine. I wondered if this cramped, covert aura hadn't disturbed some of the earliest patrons, whose memories of the air-raids would still have been fresh—but I didn't ask Nori about that. The place had always been popular, he said, especially in summer, when it was one of the coolest spots in Osaka.

A stairway descended from street level directly into the dining room so on summer days, after the heat and bright sunshine of the city, guests would sink into a cool aquatic atmosphere of dim light and swaying shadows. The stairway was flanked on one side by a small bar and on the other by the sushi counter where I'd eaten before. An adjoining room contained a larger, more formal dining space which gave onto the kitchen through a swinging door at the back. Despite the rather western-style seating arrangements (tables and chairs instead of the traditional *zabuton* and *tatami*) the dining area was decorated in authentic Japanese fashion with hanging lanterns, calligraphic scrolls, a *tokonoma* containing an empty *maki-e* vase, *bonsai* and *noren* and several framed, original *sumi-e* prints. The only unindigenous ornament was a large reproduction of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" hung conspicuously on the wall behind the sushi bar.

"Onishi-San says it's for the behoof of the American tourists," Nori explained, "but I'd *bet my bottom* he put it there for the bankers who come *in the wee-wee hours*. It's the bankers who are really interested in that stuff." He sniffed and gestured contemptuously toward "Sunflowers" and toward the *sumi-e* prints as well, as if wanting me to see he considered all art frivolous and dispensable, no matter where it came from.

I didn't realize till much later the gesture meant something else.

Nori showed me around the kitchen and introduced me to the cooks, who were just arriving. Kenji Komatsu was head chef. Before returning to Japan and starting a family he'd worked for a few years in Vancouver and Montreal and his memories of that time were good, so he was delighted to hear I was Canadian. He insisted I call him Mat. "And don't listen to anything this big whale tells you," he warned me affably, poking Nori in the stomach. "So much sugar and McDonald's the young ones are eating these days.... This one should be in the *sumo* ring, not my kitchen."

"*Sumo* is for old folk," Nori said, tightening his gut and ironically saluting a small, aproned man who had just emerged from the walk-in fridge.

"Time is on the march," Nori intoned. *"Nothing can stop it now!"*

Second chef Yukio Miyoshi glared at Nori then at me with frank disgust and muttered to himself in Japanese. He marched toward the back of the kitchen and began gutting a large fish. "Doesn't like the foreigners," Nori grinned indifferently. "So it is. You can't pleasure everybody."

The swinging door burst open and a small dark form hurtled into the kitchen and disappeared behind the steam table. Nori grabbed me by the arm.

"It's Oh-San, the sushi chef—come, we must hurry."

Mr Oh was a jittery middle-aged man who scurried through the restaurant, both hands frantically embracing a fresh mug of coffee. Like all the elder folks, Nori explained, Mr Oh worked too hard. . . .

We finally cornered him by the walk-in fridge and Nori introduced us. Clearly he had not heard of Mr Onishi's latest hiring decision—he flung down his mug and gawked as if I were a health inspector who'd just told him twenty of last night's customers were in the hospital with food poisoning.

The *yukata* which Mr Oh insisted I try on looked all right, and in the changeroom I finally gave in and let him brylcreem and comb back my curly hair into the slick, shining facsimile of a typical Japanese cut. As he worked with the comb, his face close to mine, I could see the tic in his left eye and smell his breath, pungent with coffee.

"You look *marvelous,"* Nori laughed on my return, "and you know who you are!" He winked and blew me a kiss.

Mr Onishi entered and snapped some brusque truculent command. When the others had fled to their stations he addressed me in English.

"I hope you are ready for your first shift. We will have many guests tonight. Come—you will have to serve the aliens."

From the corner of my eye I could see Nori clowning behind the grille, two chopsticks pressed to his forehead like antennae.

As I trailed Mr Onishi into the dining room two men and a woman, all young, tall, clad smartly in *yukata,* issued from behind the bar and lined up for inspection. One of the men wore a pearl earring and his hair was unusually long for a Japanese, while the woman had a rich brown, luminous skin and plump attractive features. Mr Onishi introduced the other man as Akiburo. He was a college student and looked the part with his regulation haircut and sly, wisecracking expression.

With patent dislike Mr Onishi billed the long-haired man as "your bartender, who likes to be known as Johnny Walker." The man fingered his earring and smiled out of the side of his mouth. "And this is Suzuki Michiko, a waitress." She bowed awkwardly and studied her plump brown hands, the pale skin on the underside of her wrists.

My comrades, as Mr Onishi called them, had been expecting me, and now they would show me to my sector of the restaurant—three small tables in the corner of the second room. In this occidental ghetto, it seemed, Mr Onishi thought I would do the least possible damage to the restaurant's ambience and reputation. Michiko explained in simple Japanese that since my tables were right by the kitchen door I could ask Nori for help as soon as I got in trouble.

The *tokonoma,* I now saw, had been decorated with a spray of poppies.

"We open shortly," Mr Onishi declared, striding toward us. His manner was vigorous and forceful but his eyes seemed tired, their light extinguished. "We probably will have some American guests tonight. Your job will be to service them."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"And coffee—you will now take over from Michiko and bring Mr Oh his coffee. He will want a fresh supply every half-hour. Do not forget!"

For the first hour the second room seemed empty, as did the tables of the first room, but the sushi bar was overrun within minutes by an army of ravenous, demanding guests. "Coffee," cried Mr Oh, and I brought him cup after cup while the customers gaped at me and hurled at Mr Oh questions I could not understand. The coffee yellowed his tongue and reddened his eyes, which took on a weird, narcotic glaze, while steam mixed with sweat and stood out in bold clear beads on his cheeks and upper lip. Orders were called out as more guests arrived. Mr Oh's small red hands scuttled like sand crabs over the counter, making predatory forays into the display case to seize hapless chunks of smelt or salmon or eel and then wielding above them a fish-silver knife, replacing the knife deftly, swooping down on speckled quail eggs and snapping shells between thumb and forefinger and squeezing the yolk onto bricks of rice the other hand had just formed. Then with fingers dangling the hands would hover above an almost-completed dish, and they would waver slightly like squid or octopi in currents over the ocean floor, then pounce, abrupt and accurate, on an errant grain of rice or any garnish or strip of ginger imperfectly arranged, and an instant later the finished work, irreproachable and beyond time like a still-life or a great sculpture, would appear on the glass above the display case from which it was snatched within seconds by the grateful customers or attentive staff.

The process was dizzying. I was keenly aware of my ignorance and when I was not airlifting coffee to the sushi bar I was busy in my own sector studying the menu and straightening tables.

Around eight o'clock Mr Onishi entered the second room, carrying menus, followed by a man and woman who were both heavyset, tall and fair-haired. The man wore a tailored navy suit and carried a briefcase.

The woman's hair was piled high in a steep bun that resembled the nose-cone of a rocket, and her lipstick, like her dress, was a pushy, persistent shade of red.

"Take good care with Mr and Mrs Cruikshank," Onishi-San murmured as he passed me and showed them to their seats. "Mr Cruikshank is a very important man—a diplomat, from America. Bring two dry martinis to begin."

Mr Cruikshank's voice was genteel and collected, his manner smooth as good brandy. "How long have you been working in this place?" he inquired.

"Two hours," I told him, serving the martinis.

"Surprised they'd have an American working here." With one hand he yanked a small plastic sabre from his olive, then pinched the olive and held it aloft like a tiny globe.

"I'm not American," I said.

There was a pause while Mr and Mrs Cruikshank processed this unlooked-for information.

"Well surely you're not Japanese?" Mrs Cruikshank asked, slurring her words a little. "Maybe half?"

Mr Cruikshank swallowed his olive then impaled his wife's with the plastic sword. He turned back to me, inadvertently aiming the harmless tip at my throat.

"*Nihongo wakaru*?" he asked in plain, masculine speech. You understand Japanese? I recognized his accent as outstanding.

"Only a little," I said.

"I'll bet he's Dutch," Mrs Cruikshank wagered. "The Dutch speak such beautiful English—hardly any accent at all."

"You'll find it hard here without any Japanese," Mr Cruikshank advised me, ignoring his wife, drawing the sword from his teeth so the gleaming olive stayed clenched between them.

"*Coffee*," Mr Oh called from the sushi bar.

"I'll only be serving the foreign customers, sir."

Mr Cruikshank bit into his olive. "Some of the foreign customers," he said, "prefer being served in Japanese."

"Or maybe German," said Mrs Cruikshank.

"I can speak some German," I said. "Would you like it if—"

"*Coffee*," cried Mr Oh from the sushi bar.

Mrs Cruikshank was beaming. "I was right," she said, lifting her martini glass in a kind of toast. "*Wie geht's*?"

"We'd like some sushi," Mr Cruikshank interrupted his wife, who was now grimacing at her drink as if trying to recall another German phrase.

I fumbled with my pad.

"An order each of *magura, saba, hamachi,* and—why not?—some sea urchin. Hear it's full of mercury these days, but hell, we've got to eat something."

"Yes, sir."

"And two more martinis." He pointed at his glass with the plastic sword.

"Got it."

"*Danke schön,*" roared Mrs Cruikshank as I hurried from the room. . . .

While waiting for Johnny Walker to finish the martinis I noticed an older guest rise from the sushi bar and stumble toward the washrooms. As he saw me, his red eyes widened and he lost his footing and crashed into the bar, slamming a frail elbow against the cash register. He righted himself with quick slapstick dignity and stood blushing. When I moved to help him he waved me off.

Johnn Walker smirked and muttered as he shook the martinis and for a moment the words and the rattling ice took on a primitive, mocking rhythm, like a chant. The older man began to swear at him and reached out as if to grab his earring, his long hair. *Shin jin rui,* the old man muttered—*strange inscrutable creature*! I'd heard it was a new phrase coined by the old to describe the young.

"Wake up, old man," Johnny snapped in plain Japanese as he poured the martinis. "Watch out where you're going."

The man lurched off.

"Always drunk, or fast asleep in their chairs."

"*Coffee,*" cried Mr Oh from the sushi bar.

II. The Dream

"Tell me something about the restaurant," I said to Nori, sweeping my hand in a half-circle and nodding at the closed bar. "How old is the place?"

Nori finished his Budweiser and balanced the empty can on a growing tower of empties. "It was built after the war ends," he belched—and I couldn't help noticing how casually he used the word *war*. His expression was unchanged, his voice was still firm, his eyes had not recoiled as if shamed by some unspeakable profanity. That was how my older students reacted when The War came up in a lesson. No doubt Mr Onishi would react the same way. But not Nori. For him the war was history, fiction—as unreal and insubstantial as a dimly remembered phrase, a dream of jungles, the faded memory of a picture in a storybook. He wasn't much younger than me.

"What about the name," I said, "*Yumei no ato*? I mean, I can figure out

the individual words, but I can't make sense of the whole thing." *Yumei*, I knew, meant "dream", *no* signified possession, like an apostrophe and an "s", and *ato*, I thought, meant "after".

Nori lit a cigarette and trained a mischievous gaze on my hairline. His capacity for drink was larger than average for a Japanese but now after four tins of beer he was flushed, theatrical and giddy. He wrinkled his broad nose, as if at a whiff of something rotten, and spat out, "It's a line from a poem we had to study in the high school. Ah, Steve-San, University is so much better, we have fun in the sun, we make whoopee, we live for the present tense and forget all our yesterdays and tomorrows—I hated high school, so much work. We had to study this famous poem."

He stood and recited the lines with mock gravity:

> *"Natsu kusa ya!*
> *Tsuamono domo ga*
> *Yumei no ato."*

"It's a *haiku*," I said.

"Aye, aye, captain." He slumped down and the tower of beer cans wobbled. "Do you watch Star Trek?"

"I'm not sure," I said, "that I understand it."

"Oh, well, it's just a TV show—about the future and the stars."

"I mean the poem, Nori, the *haiku*."

"Ah, the poem—naturally you don't understand. It's old Japanese—old Japanese language, old Japanese mind—not so easy for us to understand either. It's Matsuo Bashō, dead like Shakespeare over three hundred years. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. We had to study them both in school. Full fathom five and all that."

"But about that last line. . . ."

"*Yumei no ato?*"

I nodded.

"That's the name of the restaurant. You see, when Mr Onishi's uncle built the place after the war he gave it that name. It's a very strange name for a restaurant! Mr Onishi was just a boy then."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't think Mr Onishi would have called it that, but when his uncle went over the bucket he didn't want to change the name. Out of respect."

I finished my own beer and contributed to the tower of cans. The other staff had gone upstairs to the *karaoke* place but they'd drunk a lot of Bud and Kirin beforehand and the tower was growing high.

"I wonder," I said, "if the words mean 'when the dream is over'?"

Nori took a long drag on his cigarette. "I don't think they do," he finally said. "And besides, the dream had only just begun.... The uncle was smart and he built *Yumei no ato* to attract foreigners as well as Japanese and it's done really well, as you can see." His eyes brightened. "*We're going great guns.*"

Mr Onishi's telephone began to ring from the back of the restaurant, where he was still working. We heard his answer.

"The first line," I said, "is 'Ah! Summer grasses', right?"

Nori seemed to be weighing this, then blurted out, "*Yumei no ato* means...it means what's left over after a dream."

Mr. Onishi's voice could be heard faintly. I surveyed the shaky tower, the ashtrays, the skeletons of fish beached on the sides of our empty plates.

"Leftovers," I said, ironically.

"There's another word."

"What about vestige? No? Remnant?"

Nori stubbed his cigarette like a game-show panelist pressing a buzzer. *Remnant*!" he cried, "*your choice is absolutely correct, for five thousand dollars and a dream home*!" Suddenly he grew calm, thoughtful. "So many foreign words sound alike," he mused. "There's a famous Dutch painter with that name."

"Rembrandt?" I said.

"That's him. A bank here in Umeda just bought a Remnant for nine hundred million yen."

"*Yumei no ato*," I said, "must mean 'the remnant of dreams'."

Nori furrowed his brow, then nodded.

"Funny name for a restaurant," I said. "You like game shows?"

As if in a fresh wind the paper *noren* in the doorway behind the sushi bar blew open and a haggard phantom came in. Mr Onishi. He seemed to look right through us. Nori suggested we clean up and leave. We began to pile the chopsticks and empty plates into a tray. I glanced up and saw Mr Onishi beckoning Nori.

"Please go examine the guest toilet," Nori told me.

The guest washroom was immaculate—I'd cleaned it myself two hours before—but I spent a few minutes checking it again so Nori and Mr Onishi would know I was thorough. For the second time that night I was intrigued by a notice in the stall, pencilled on the back of an old menu and taped to the door—

TO ALL FOREIGNERS:
OUR TUBES ARE IN ILL REPAIR, PLEASE
DO NOT THROW YOUR PEEPERS
IN THE TOILET.

When I came out of the washroom Mr Onishi was gone. "The boss looks awful," I whispered to Nori, my smile forced. "When he was on the phone before—maybe a guest was calling to complain about the new waiter, eh?"

"Possibly," Nori said, "but more likely it was a banker?"

"What, at this time of night?"

Nori shrugged. "The elder folks, I told you, they're working late. And early, too—there was a banker here first thing this morning to talk at Mr Onishi."

"Bankers," I scoffed, shaking my head. "Not trouble, I hope. . . ."

Nori laughed abruptly. Arm tensed karate-style he approached the tower of cans.

III. The Kermess

CAMPAI!

A month has gone past and the whole staff, *gaijin-san* included, are relaxing after a manic Saturday night in the *Yumei no ato*. August in Osaka: with other waiters and students and salarymen we sit in a beer garden under the full moon above twenty-two storeys of department store merchandise, imported clothing and cologne and books and records, Japanese-made electronics, wedding supplies, Persian carpets and French cigarettes and aquariums full of swordfish and coral and casino-pink sand from the Arabian Sea, appliances and applique, blue-china chopstick-holders computers patio-furniture coffee-shops chefs and friendly clerks and full-colour reproductions of well-known Western portraits, etchings, sketches, sculptures, landscapes that Japanese banks are buying like real estate and bringing back to Osaka, anything, anything at all, SPEND AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN, endless armies of customers and ah, summer tourists billowing like grain through the grounds of Osaka's most famous department store. SURELY, quoth the televangelist from the multitudinous screens, SURELY THE PEOPLE IS GRASS.

(For a moment the tables shudder as a tremour ripples through toxic earth under the Bargain Basement, and passes.)

CAMPAI! Western rock and roll music blasts from hidden speakers. In a few minutes the *O-bon* fireworks are due to start and we've got the best seats in the house. The plastic table sags and may soon buckle as another round of draft materializes and is swiftly distributed. A toast to this, a toast to that, *campai*, *CAMPAI*, every time we lift our steins to take a drink, someone is proposing another toast: in a rare gesture Komatsu

toasts the wait-staff (Akiburo and Jonny and Michiko and me) because (this in English) we were really on the balls tonight and made no errors at all. *Campai*! Akiburo toasts Komatsu and Mr Oh and second chef Miyoshi in return, presumably for turning out so much good food on such a busy night and making it all look easy. *Campai*! Mr Oh raises his glass of ice-coffee in thanks while second chef Miyoshi, drunk and expansive, in a rare good mood, toasts Nori for not smacking his head in the storeroom when he went back for extra soy sauce, *CAMPAI*, (this translated by the delighted Nori, who immediately hefts his stein and decrees a toast to Michiko, the waitress, simply because he's mad about her and isn't it lucky she doesn't speak English?)

The blushing Michiko lifts her heavy stein with soft plump hands and meekly suggests, in Japanese, that it might be possible, perhaps, to maybe if it isn't too much trouble drink a toast to our skillful bartender, Johnny Walker, without whom we would hardly have survived the night, it seems to me, after all, or maybe we might have? *Campai*! *Campai*! The flesh of Johnny's ear lobe reddens around his pearl stud. He smirks and belts back another slug of whiskey.

"To Onishi-San," he says in English. "To *Yumei no ato*." And he quickly adds some other remark in harsh, stacatto Japanese.

"*CAMPAI*!" I holler, hoisting my stein triumphantly so that beer froths up and sloshes over the lip of the glass. But no one else has followed suit. They are all gazing without expression at the table or into their drinks. Johnny Walker's head hangs lowest, his features hidden.

Komatsu glances at his watch and predicts that the fireworks will start in thirty seconds.

I turn to Nori. "Did I do something wrong?"

Miyoshi and Mr Oh both snap something at him. I can't make out a word.

"Well, not at all," says Nori, softly, "I guess people just don't feel like talking about work after a busy night."

I purse my lips. "I have the feeling you're not being completely honest with me."

"Of course I'm not!" Nori protests, and I wonder if we've understood each other.

At that moment the fireworks start. Everyone at our table looks up, relieved. "*O-bon*," Nori says to me, relaxed again. "Tonight the ancestors return." Flippantly he rolls his eyes, or only seems to—I can't be sure because his coke-bottle lenses reflect the moonlight and the fierce red glare of the first rockets. One after another they arc up out of the dark expanse of Nagai Park, miles to the north, then slow down and pause at their zenith and explode in corollas of violet, emerald, coral,

cream, apricot and indigo. *Hanabi*, they call them in Japanese: fire-flowers. The steins are raised again, glasses rammed together, toasts made and spirits drawn skyward by the aerial barrage.

My flat is somewhere down there on the far side of Nagai Park and now I picture a defective missile veering off course and buzzing my neighbourhood, terrifying the old folks, plunging with a shriek like an air-raid siren through the roof of my flat. . . .

Nori grabs my arm with steely fingers. "Steve-san, listen—do you hear what I hear?" I'm still concentrating on the look and sound of the exploding flowers, but suddenly I pick it out: the bouncy unmistakable opening bars of "Like a Virgin."

"It's the Madonna!"

"I hear it, Nori."

He lumbers to his feet. "You want to dance? Hey, get up! Come off it!"

Michiko and Johnny Walker are already up beside the table, strobe-lit by the fireworks, shaking themselves to the beat, Michiko with a timid, tentative look and Johnny with self-conscious abandon. The older staff sit motionless and watch the exploding rockets. Nori glances at them, at Michiko, at me, and I can tell he doesn't want to lose her. As she dances her small hands seem to catch and juggle the light.

"Life is so curt," he pleads. "You only lived once!" He gives me a half-smile, a sly wink, and I'm no longer sure he doesn't know exactly what he's saying.

CAMPAI! Nori hauls me to my feet and heaves me from the table in a blind teetering polka, out towards Johnny and Michiko, his big boorish feet beating a mad tattoo on my toes. Komatsu and Mr Oh, the elders in the crowd, link arms and start keening some old Japanese song. Steins raised they sway together to a stately rhythm much slower than Madonna's, their voices rolling mournfully over the antique minors and archaic words. The rockets keep exploding. Their sound takes on a rhythm which seems to fall between the beats of the opposing songs—then as I watch, one of the rockets fails to burst. Like a falling star it streaks earthward in silence and disappears over the city.

IV. Guernica

I woke early the next morning with a headache and a burning stomach. I'd been dreaming. I dreamed Michiko had come home with me to my flat and we stood together hand-in-hand on the threshold, staring in at a gutted interior. The guilty rocket, however, had not actually exploded—it was resting in perfect condition, very comfortably, on an unburnt, freshly-made *futon* in the centre of the room.

Michiko took me by the hand and led me into the ruin. When the smoke began to drown me she covered my mouth with her own. Her breath was clean and renewing as wind off an early-morning sea and when she pulled away the smell of burning gas was gone. She removed her flowered kimono and stood naked before me. The nipples of her firm small breasts were now the accusing eyes of a seduced and betrayed woman—then I was naked too, and utterly absolved, and we were lying side by side amid the acrid wreckage by the futon. She climbed atop me and took me inside her, slowly, making small articulate sighs and rolling her head back and forth so her dark bangs rippled like a midnight waterfall across my nipples, and the blue-black hair was curved as space-time and full of sparks like the Milky Way, which in the Japanese tongue is called *ama no gawa*, the river of heaven.

I wanted to come, to fill the gathering space inside her, and I wanted to run my tongue down the soft pale line of hair from her breasts to her belly and on up the wooden mound of Venus and lick the nectar from her tender orchid, as the Japanese poets say, but then it came to me that Nori had meant to tell me something important—about Michiko? About a poem? Or was there something I'd asked him that he hadn't answered?

Summer grasses.... Something left over after dreams....

What a stupid time to be thinking about poetry.

I woke embarrassed but with a feeling of desperate tenderness for Michiko, to whom I'd hardly ever spoken and who had inspired, I thought, no more than a generic interest on my part. It was like missing a lover who'd slept beside me all night and had just left and gone home before I woke....

Well, I reflected, a dream like that was better than the waitering nightmares I'd had all the time till recently, and still woke from now and then. Usually I'd enter the restaurant and be told I was two hours late and none of the other wait-staff had shown up and the restaurant was full and we were booked solid till midnight. Other times I would realize I'd forgotten a couple or threesome who'd been seated two hours ago in the back corner of the second room and would they believe now it was just an honest mistake and I'd really been busy and meaning to get to them all along? Sometimes they were the Cruikshanks, and sometimes Mr Sato who (Nori had told me) was a professor at the University in Kyōto but had been demoted and now taught primary kids in Nagai, and that was why he drank so much and was so cold and pedantic when he spoke to you. In fact the unrequited dream-diners could be just about anyone, because the summer had been busy and now I was serving both foreigners and Japanese alike.

It had been the busiest summer in years, Komatsu said, and we were

attracting more tourists than ever before—so why the visible anxiety whenever talk after-hours came round to the restaurant? Mr Onishi did not look like a man with a flourishing business. Perhaps he was ill and everyone was worried? I'd been reading articles lately about the soaring incidence of cancer in Japan, the spread of big business and factories into the countryside, toxins in the soil, polluted water, poisonous seafood. . . .

"I think you'd better level with me," I told Nori the night of my dream.

Miyoshi was standing by the walk-in, reading the *Sangyo Keizai*, and Komatsu was behind the steam table chopping onion. But I had the feeling they were listening to us, and so did Nori.

"*Not here,*" he whispered.

"Ah, such good news," growled Miyoshi, lowering his paper with an unpleasant smile. Since he hardly ever spoke English I knew the remark was meant for me. "Such good news about the yen!"

Nori shook his head. "For some the war has never ended."

"*Nihon ichiban*!" Miyoshi cried. "Japan is number one."

"And he wasn't even born till after," Nori grumbled. "I don't understand."

"Maybe we should talk somewhere else," I said.

Nori nodded, but Komatsu set down his knife and said quickly "No. It's all right. Steve-san is part of the restaurant now—we should tell him the truth." Eyes pink and glistening, he walked out from behind the steam table and pulled the newspaper from Miyoshi's hands.

Miyoshi scowled, did an about-face and marched into the fridge.

"Look at this," Komatsu sniffled, handing me the paper.

"You know I can't read Japanese."

"Of course. Don't read, just look—the pictures."

In the lower right-hand corner of the front page several well-known pieces of European art were reproduced in hazy black and white. One was a Rousseau, the second a Gaugin, the third a Brueghel. I couldn't read the caption beneath but I could make out the name of a prominent Osaka bank, written in *romaji*.

"And Van Gogh," Komatsu said, frowning. "I hear they have just bought another costly painting by Van Gogh—so many paintings they are buying and bringing to Japan."

We could hear Miyoshi in the fridge, muttering to himself, furiously shifting things around.

"They're buying everything in their sights," Nori said, his usual gusto tangibly absent.

I told them I knew a bit about these purchases, but didn't see what they had to do with us.

"Well," Komatsu started, "they need some place to put these paint-

ings. . . ." His voice tapered off on the last words. I sensed I was being counted on, in customary Japanese fashion, to finish the sentence mentally so that everyone would be spared embarrassment.

"Chagall, too," Komatsu resumed, "and Rembrandt and Picasso." *Bigasshole,* it sounded like, but I knew who he meant. "Costly things. . . they need to find a place to put them all. . . ."

"Like an art gallery," I said.

Komatsu rubbed his eyes with a corner of his apron. "I'm afraid so."

It had been just like Dallas, Nori groaned, describing how the bank had first made polite offers to the dozen businesses operating in the block where they meant to build, and most were politely accepted. But several proprietors (including Mr Onishi and the owner of the Idaho Caffeine Palace, a large coffee shop dating to the late forties) had refused to consider them. Secretly the bank made more attractive offers, then a final offer which the firm's representative begged Mr Onishi to accept, because if a negotiated settlement proved necessary then payment would revert to the level of the initial sum—or, conceivably, somewhat less.

Mr Onishi had ignored the bank's covert threats and a negotiated settlement proved necessary. Unfortunately it did not involve negotiation. The bank produced lawyers who showed that actual title to the land had belonged to the bank till the end of the war and they argued that the transfer of deeds had been improperly handled by the overworked civil authorities of the time.

The young lawyers (I could just hear them) moved further that since the art gallery would be a public facility of great benefit to all citizens of the prefecture and would attract hundreds of thousands of foreigners to Osaka, it was in effect a civic institution, albeit privately owned, and the city should urge Mr Onishi to come to terms.

"The court is asking Mr Onishi to accept," Nori said, "but he just says no."

Nihon ichiban, we heard faintly from the fridge.

Komatsu took the newspaper from me and walked back around the steam table. He began to giggle, like a bad comedian setting up a punchline. "They're going to tear us down," he said, laughing openly. "Soon!"

Nori was chuckling, too, as the Japanese often will when speaking of their own misfortunes. Komatsu was laughing harder than I'd ever seen him, so I knew he must really be upset.

I paused respectfully. "Listen, I'm really sorry to hear this."

Komatsu roared with laughter. Nori continued to cackle. I asked them if they knew when these things were going to happen.

"There's no time like presently," Nori said, slapping me on the shoulder a bit harder than he needed to. "Come on, it's a busy night tonight, we'd better get happening."

"Please take coffee now to Mr Oh-San," Komatsu giggled.

Miyoshi was still marching around in the fridge.

V. The Starry Night

September in Osaka is just as hot as July or August and this year it was worse. Though many of the tourists were gone, the *Yumei no ato* was busier than ever—Mr Onishi's struggle with the bank was now common knowledge, so old customers came often to show their support and the sushi bar was crowded with curious locals. Meanwhile enrollment was picking up at the school and I had to cut back on my hours as a waiter.

Mr Onishi was upset when I told him, but since I knew now of the epic struggle he was waging each day in the courts (Nori got the details from Komatsu and passed them on to me) I found it hard to feel angry in return. The boss, after all, was showing tremendous pluck. Sure, he was of another generation, a hardy breed of industrious survivors, and as a child he would have absorbed with his mother's milk the bracing formula of *bushido*, but this was valour way beyond the call of duty. He was giving Japan's second biggest bank the fight of its life. Already the original date for demolition was three weeks in arrears. . . .

I heard that after receiving the court's final decision, Mr Onishi sighed and said, "*Yappari, nah.* It is as I expected. They will build a museum and a new country and fill both with foreign things."

The demolition was set for the last day of September and the *Yumei no ato* was to close a week before.

On the last night, a Saturday, the dining room was booked solid from five till closing with regular customers, both Japanese and foreign. We assembled by the bar a few minutes before five to wait for Mr Onishi and at five sharp he emerged from his office. He marched up to us, a menu tucked under one arm like a swagger stick, then briefed us in a formal and highly nuanced Japanese that I could not follow, though the general tenor of his speech was easy enough to guess. Or was it? Sometimes I wondered if I'd ever done more than misimagine what these people felt and believed.

A current of laughter rippled through the staff and Nori nudged me appreciatively, forgetting for a moment I did not understand.

Mr Onishi dismissed us and we hurried off to complete our prepara-

tions as he climbed the stairs and opened the door. A long shaft of dirty sunlight pierced the cool gloom, and a few seconds later our guests began to descend, bringing with them the hot muggy air of the street.

"Meet me in the back," I told Nori.

We stood in the kitchen on either side of the open rice machine, slowly filling it with the contents of two clay cooking pots. Thick billows of steam rose between us and Nori's face was intermittently clouded, his eyes nacreous, indistinct, like a man under a foot of water.

"So what did Onishi-San say," I asked, scooping the soft, sweet-smelling grains into the machine.

"He was apologizing."

"Apologizing," I said.

"Sure. He was apologizing for letting the bank close the *Yumei no ato*. He says it's all on his shoulders. He feels responsible for the jobs we will lose. He says he is sorry because he has felled us."

The steam was thinning and I could see Nori clearly. His big face was pink and sweating.

"He says his uncle was a soldier in the old navy and after the war he built this restaurant with his own two hands. So he says that by losing the restaurant he has failed his uncle, too."

"But isn't his uncle dead?"

Nori put down his pot and gave me a faintly disappointed look.

"For many years. But so the old people believe—they can feel the dead as well as the breathing. Like being caught *between the devil and the deep blue sea, neh*?"

I nodded and stared into the rice cooker, its churning steam spectral and hypnotic.

"I feel sorry for him," I said.

"So it is, all the while. The big fish eat the little."

There was a harsh grating sound as he scraped rice from the bottom of his pot.

It was the busiest night of the summer but the customers were gentle and undemanding and the atmosphere, as at a funeral reception, was chastened and sadly festive and thick with solidarity. The foreigners left huge tips and Mr Oh grunted graciously whenever I freshened his coffee. It fell to Michiko to serve the disagreeable Mr Sato for the last time and

though he usually deplored the grammar and fashions of her generation, he was tolerant tonight and even remarked at one point on her resemblance to his own daughter. The Cruikshanks were among the last to arrive. When they left, just before closing, Mrs Cruikshank said she trust-

ed I wouldn't have to go home to Germany just yet and surely with my good English I could land another job. . . .

The last guests, our oldest customers, intoxicated and teary-eyed, staggered up the stairs around midnight and we dragged together a few tables and sank down for a last meal. Mat and Nori and second chef Miyoshi filed from the kitchen bearing platters of steaming rice and salmon teriyaki; at Mr Onishi's behest Johnny Walker opened the bar to all staff. And now, though I'd felt more and more a part of things over the last months, I sensed my saddened colleagues closing ranks, retreating into dialect, resorting to nuance, idiom and silence, a semaphore of glances and tics and nods. Nori loomed on the far side of the table with Michiko beside him. They were talking quietly. In the shadows by their chair-legs I could see two hands linked, like sinuous sea-creatures, twined and mating in the deep.

Johnny had finished the last of the Johnny Walker Red and was now working on a bottle of Old Granddad. Mr Oh was not drinking. He sat mutely, his agile hands wrapped around one beer tin after another, crushing them and laying them to rest among the plates and ashtrays. Komatsu and second chef Miyoshi were smoking side by side, eyes half-closed, meditating on the fumes that rose and spread outward over their heads.

Mr Onishi, I suppose, was in his office. At one-thirty he came out and told everyone it was time to leave. There were some last half-hearted toasts and deep bowing and then we all stumbled upstairs and outside. The night air was cool and fresh. We looked, I thought, like a beaten rabble. As if wounded, Nori tottered over and proffered a scrap of paper the size of a cheque or phone bill. "Here," he said, his speech slurred, "I almost forgot. That poem they called the restaurant for. . . . Remember?"

He and Michiko swayed before me, their features painted a smooth flawless amber by the gentle light of the doorway. Behind them the brooding profiles of bank and office towers and beyond those in long swirling ranks the constellations of early autumn.

I took the slip of paper and held it to the light:

> Ah! summer grass/ this group of warriors'/ remnant of dream
> (this poem by Matsuo Bashō, lived same time as Shakespeare)
>
> So long and take care of yourself. Nori.

He shrugged when I thanked him. "We had to study it back then. A real pin in the ass."

"Drop by the school sometime," I said. "Please, both of you. . . ."

I knew they wouldn't come.

Gradually the rest straggled off alone or in pairs and I headed for the station. Waves of heat rising from sewers, smokestacks and vacant pavement set the stars quivering, like the scales of small fish in dark water. In the late-summer heat of 1945, after the surrender, Japanese armies trudged back through the remains of Osaka and there was little where these buildings now stood but rubble, refuse, dust and blowing ash. A stubble of fireweed and wildflowers bloomed on the ruins, rippled in the hot wind. There was nothing for the children to eat. I heard these things from a neighbour, a toothless old man who had been a soldier at that time, and I heard other things as well: how faceless Japan had been, how for awhile it had been a different place—beaten, levelled and overrun, unable to rise—waiting for the first touch of a foreign hand. For a sea change, into something rich, and strange.

On the train to Nagai I had a half-hour to experiment with the words on Nori's farewell card. By the time I got home I had the translation done, though the line "*yumei no ato*" was still troublesome and I found it hard to focus on the page.

Ah, summer grass!
All that survives
Of the warrior's dream. . . .

I keep thinking I should send a copy to Nori.

Eugenio Montale
Translated from the Italian by Cynthia Gabrielli

The Occasions "Motets"

3

Frost on the windowpanes: the sick
always together and always
separate; and at the tables
long declamations over cards.

Your exile. Also mine, and I'm
remembering mornings among the boulders
when I heard the crackle of the
ballerina bomb.

And all night long the fireworks continued:
like a celebration.

The brush of a rough wing that only grazed the palms:
it was not in the cards this time.

4

I was with you at a distance when your father
took his leave of you and entered the shadows.
In those days what did I know? Only surviving
the first time saved me for this:

who didn't know you and wasn't bound to you: new blows
revive the past, when time bends back upon itself
and brings me Cumerlotti
or Anghebeni—amid shells exploding
and lamentations and disarray in the squadrons.

5

Goodbyes, whistles in the dark, waves, coughing
and windows slamming down. It's time. Perhaps
the automatons are right. From the corridors how they seem
to be coupling, buried alive!
. . .
—And you in the muted litany of your rapido
are you yielding to this hideous
and exact cadenza of carioca?—

6

The hope of ever seeing you again
was beginning to leave me;

and I had to know if what cuts me off
from every sense of you, screen of my own devising,
is death's kiss or the past sending me
one more sign, distorted and defanged,
of your peculiar radiance:

(at Modena, in the arcades,
a liveried servant was struggling with
two jackals on a single leash).

7

The black and white swallows rising and
falling like musical scales
from the telegraph poles to the sea
are no consolation at the hour of departure
nor will they bring you back to where you are no longer.

Already a thick scent of elderberry
fills the excavation; the deluge has stopped.
If the returning brightness is some kind of truce,
then the dear threat of you cancels it out.

Laurie Block

LOCAL COLOUR

Give me your thoughts on snow
an impossible dialect your skin repeats
the charms of adobe temple bells
curse of the indian sun
you travel on next-to-nothing
bottled water curiosity
love you say it's nothing
to cross the border
promise you'll send a picture

Fold this page imagine
what divides us paradise
the net night hangs around you
talking with your hands in holy places
innoculated against ice
I shiver to think of you
addressing the bed in feathers
your passport under the pillow

Can you see my breath
chapped skin absence
I survive the familiar
on kindling and preserves
prepared for break-up
the ring of mercury at zero
my clock flashing the hour without a face
I count its gifts

winter nights blue vellum
the furnace kicking in
ruins you may visit in spring

BOLDFACE

Just because he changed his name to Raoul
rigged himself in spandex and neon and dreams
he's flying, hang-gliding over black fields

just because he makes himself conspicuous
cruising through town on adolescent wheels
drives that hot rod fast
down a one way street, smoked glass and chrome
candyapple red

just because he says he can look after himself
surviving on tuna and take-out
just because he doesn't want anybody
to serve it up and watch him eat
the blueplate special, *soup du jour*

just because you saw it coming a mile away
don't trivialize his condition
because when she left
it hurt right here
and here and here when you touch it

Travelling West

Ingrid Macdonald

Travelling North: To go west, first travel north. Celia's hand holds its optimistic thumb to the sunburnt highway and something paces inside me, a dog, I think, hungry for love. Leaning on my canvas knapsack, I doodle a song on the neck of my guitar. Summer is an x-ray of heat on the road, translucent, overexposed. In the distance the trucks ripple, their 18 wheels evaporating into the dotted line. We step up to their cheap cabins, the cheap seats, country music and Export-A's, CB jargon, radio crackle. When men are that lonely there isn't much to talk about, *over good buddy*, and they pick us up and let us down and the distance north gets smaller.

Finding Hugh: Celia laughs she is young and when she tells me how things are with her, she is old. I am photographing Celia both ways with my eyes when a truck with Texan plates grinds its gears down and opens its doors. A little man sits in its high seats, like a little king, and he waves us in. He brings us through the miles of rust spruce in his truck and we've never had it so good. Den of red leather, antlers, playboys, cowboy boots, carpeting, a stereo, he says *take off your shoes if you're gonna put your feet on the dash, this is my home*. The hours drive by and his hands steer the wheel lightly, *you ever want to learn to drive a truck, you come with me, I'll teach you*. It is a good opportunity, fairly offered which I decline. Celia is enthusiastic. *Next year*, she promises with the resolve of a retiring boxer, *next year*.

Watermelon seeds: Another truck is stopped, engine hood up, doors open on the back, a load of fruit from Florida getting ripe, coming north. Celia and I go off and find a ditch to pee in while Hugh looks at the stopped engine. A young man swats mosquitoes and a woman climbs down from his truck, lifts down a baby and then another child and another. They talk until Hugh shakes his head. He lays down and looks under the body, rolls back out and says something about the brakes being bad but the young man shrugs. It's a company truck. Hugh comes back, *he's got his whole family in there and a lousy set of brakes*. The gravel under

our feet is a beach of white stones, bright and dry in the sun. Hugh has brought huge slabs of watermelon for us. We spit our seeds on the ground.

Lone Goose: *Don't ever do that again.* Hugh scolds me. He was on the phone when the waitress came, so I paid for the coffees. He walks quick and manlike to the truck and pulls out my guitar and I think he's turfing me right here at the where the hell are we Lone Goose cafe but he says *can you play this thing or what?* Celia intervenes, *of course she can.* The trees are my velvet curtains and the parking lot my darkened stage. I'm singing as the dusk falls, comforting a man whose pride I hurt when I laid down a dollar for three coffees, and all the songs I've written of broken homes and lonely fathers come to mind. Hugh leans against the cooling chrome grill. I can see it in his eyes, how he is proud of me. He says, *One day I'm gonna tell people that you rode in my truck and they won't believe me.*

Hold it: When you are with strangers, even nice ones, you never know what's gonna happen next. So I'm almost not surprised when, at the Terry Fox memorial statue of all places, Hugh reaches under his seat and pulls out a gun. A gun is heavier than you think and he brings it out to make a point. *Girls like you disappear in the bush every day on the west coast,* he says. *Don't go west.* And Celia, forever delighted by the news, says, *Can I see it?* He takes the bullets out and Celia holds it in her cupped hands for the longest time. Then Celia passes it to me, commenting on its cool hardness, wanting me to feel it, insisting I touch it. It is heavy as a magnet, and I hand it quickly back. That night Hugh pays for the polkadot motel room and the kingsize bed that Celia and I sleep in while he curls up in the bunker of his truck. But the yellow-jacket Celia took with her beer ruined it, and she cries, she gets sick in the washroom, she begs for a scrap of the love that was hers in the first place.

Breakfast special: The next morning everything is replaced, the sun on eggs, the waitress in the coffeeshop setting the tables, filling the sugar. The contractor arrives, to arrange for the load that Hugh has been hauling, a load of fibreglass it turns out. Seeing us, a pair of girls like salt and pepper shakers, at the table the contractor says, *oh Hugh you've brought your family.* He says the word family with gusto, it is a good and wholesome word to say loudly on the morning-after in the coffeeshop. *Hell no,* Hugh says, *these are my girlfriends.* We wave in giggly unison, but this is the last he'll see of us. We are leaving Hugh that day, going fur-

ther north while he runs an empty truck back south, to bring more fibreglass, to bring more fruit, north.

True north: Celia and I travel north and it all comes true. North through longsleeved days in air opaqued by blackflies and at night the curtain of insects lifts. The air is intensely clear like the glassy surface of night's lake, a thousand feet up a harbour of stars. At the gas pumps moths cloud the light around a single lamp, a shifting luminous flower glowing in the dark atop a stem. Celia holds out her thumb to the road and I follow, gaining whatever courage I never had by being with her. She laughs and says, *I feel like I'm out here looking for love*, and I agree, but it isn't the same for me. What I'm searching for isn't that far away only too difficult to ask for. We travel north until the axis shifts under our feet, and north spits us out and geography fools us. Suddenly we are south and east again, newborn, foundlings, at the edge of the prairie. We exchange the pursuit of north, unattainable, infinite northness for the pursuit of west. West has an edge, a geographic limit. West is where the sun goes down, west can be achieved, west ends.

The paintbox: The fields are purple, flax, yellow, sunflower, wheat, green, red, poppy, a land of deep colours cut in squares, like the cakes of colour in the child's paint box that I travel with. The sky is so azure it's festive, done up in a parade of clouds. It looks like a prairie main street on a holiday, empty but decorated. Sometimes I take out a piece of paper intending to write something down when I draw something instead. Only a detail, never a landscape, only something small, the way a flower along the road looks maybe, which I colour in with the colours in the paint box. It's never a whole picture, and never a picture of Celia, though I want to draw her when I steal glances. Once I broke through and drew her hands.

Highway Jesus: This is the summer that Jesus carries his giant crucifix across Canada wearing his trademark beard and swaddling clothes. We see him several times on the edge of Trans-Canada, cars pulled over, people talking to him. In the next town we stay at a hostel where I sing for the german girls wanting to comfort them, because they seem so lonely. Something in my voice only makes it worse and they wring their hands and cry. I look for Celia and find her on the backsteps with the woman who changes the sheets, smoking cigarettes. Celia is comfortable with strangers and the woman has seen Jesus. He stayed at the hostel too, and when he did she saw the crucifix up close and touched it. It is real wood with wheels on its end, to make it easier to carry.

Yellowjackets: Celia's black and yellow pills with the venom of wasps, my red wine, the stink of smoked grass, the highway an addiction of long and short shadows. The mountains come toward us and our eyes are cheap cameras against them until looking is seeing a rack of postcards at the check-out counter, and maybe I had hoped for something better. But I don't know what and the hungry dog in me paces and I have less and less to say to Celia.

The dog: The day I leave her, Celia is standing at the crest of an intense green hill. Near her, the french speaking boys talk among themselves. They are the soft spoken, elusive and untranslated boys she sleeps with at night. I climb up to her to say I am leaving in the morning but it is a backward way of saying come back to me, and she hears it only in its forward version. The green hill is soft moss under my feet, but it isn't easy to walk away. From the top of the hill Celia holds out her hands, as if they are dripping, as if I could go and lift her up to me. She has lost her contact lens and I hear her calling me back. Celia shouts, *But I can't see, but I can't see.* Her voice fades as I turn a corner, where a stray dog crosses me and snaps at my hand. I pull away in time, raise my hand, he yawns on his haunches and looks me in the eye.

Travelling west: After that Celia and I travel west, individually.

The valley: By the time I reach the Okanagan valley, it is pouring rain. The arid hills of apple and apricot trees run ochre, mud in gulleys, puddles on dirt roads where the rain pounds its fists down. It is almost sunny through the glassy yellow rain. I stand outside the rain, in the doorway of a small church. Across from me a hamburger stand sells french fries to a man. He looks just a little older than me. In boots and khaki shorts, he runs through the rain, hands covering his fries, to stand in the doorway with me. We talk lightly. He is from New Zealand. He asks where I camp at night. I don't have a tent. *Why would you set out from home without a tent?* I don't know. I didn't even know that I didn't have a tent until he mentioned it.

Acquiescence: He doesn't like my name. My name is ethnic, but he doesn't say that is the problem. He only says, *it's an entirely forgettable name*, and he suggests another name for me. His name is Peter and the name he suggests for me is Mary. A kind of disbelief drips like a drug into my blood. For a moment I feel very far away and ask myself, *if my name is forgettable how can any name be remembered?* Then I think of Peter, Paul and Mary and want to spray his face with spit, in a laugh. Only some-

thing in me has evaporated and there is a new desert here, with fruit trees growing in the terraced hills, and fewer reasons to keep one name above any other. I swallow. *Okay,* I say, *if you want.*

The garden: It has stopped raining and the valley has quickly regained its desert persona. We are like apostles looking for work after the crucifixion, going door to door seeing if anyone needs help. Finally an elderly couple, who live in a bungalow with a picture window that looks onto the lake, take us on as their gardeners. We tell them our names and the man ponders them, *how biblical.* I know little about gardening and do fair job of ripping up an entire asparagus patch before Peter intervenes. The more he smiles and calls me Mary, the better I learn to hate him. We sleep in a tent where I never let him touch me. Evenings I go down to the orchards by myself. I sit in the man's pickup truck, play the radio and write poetry on scraps of paper.

Loosening up: Peter is jealous of my scraps of paper, he says, *writing is your way of being selfish.* I won't show him my poems, but I play guitar for him. One night I am singing in a cherry orchard, when he decides he should be my manager. He tells me how it will be. *We'll get a VW van and travel up and down the coast,* me Mary, singing, he Peter, arranging the bookings. I say, *if you want.* When he is mowing the lawn the next morning I knock on the door of the man's house. *I just want you to know that my name isn't Mary,* and I tell him my real name. The man is puzzled. *Peter thought it was too forgettable,* I explain. Peter has already told him that we don't have sex. We are stranger than he thought, although, about the name, the man seems slightly relieved. *Your own name is much better,* he assures me. About the sex, his advice had been, Peter should loosen up a little.

A tent: At the local cafe I find a notice for a rainbow festival, south of where we are. Something tells me that Celia might be there, angry but willing to make up, stubborn but willing to change. We could finish the way and travel west together. The man is carrying groceries up the stairs when I ask him if he might have a tent that I could borrow for a week or so. I pretend that I have already made the arrangements with Peter, to take a short trip by myself. It only takes an afternoon, and I'm deep in Dukobour territory on a pine soaked road, with a pup tent, my knapsack and guitar. Peter climbs down from his ladder a hundred miles away and to find he has no way of finding his Mary.

Hell's angels: Three arrowhead lakes slice through the mountains,

shaped like a compass needle, tapered at the ends, pointing north to south. I take a small ferry across and walk the last miles down a road. At the end of it, there is folk music, a big tent with vegetarian food, sufi dancing, an astrologer and naked swimming in a mountain creek. Bearded me and their earth mother old ladies have come to this unmarked place. I search for Celia, hopeful for her short hair among the patchouli scented women. Then I realise I have it wrong. In the makeshift parking lot, bikers have congregated. Bulky as heffers, they rev their bikes the length of the day, turning the summer grass to muck. They are Hell's angels, fallen angels, here, but not coming in. They brag and tussle. I go out to the parking lot and walk up and down the line of Harley's looking for Celia, loud and laughing among their women.

Love: By evening, I give up my search, go back inside and sit with one of the folkheroes. He is bearded, wearing a kind of free flowing moo-moo with sweat stains under his arms and beads around his neck. He is a poetry professor at a small american college, and gets his summers off, but he isn't happy. The seventies have bittered him, and the dawn of the eighties has brought only despair. *Nobody's hip anymore*, he tells me, *the sixties man, that was a time. Gasoline was 33 cents a gallon, acid was 25 cents a hit, and love was free.*

Eating soup: On Sunday night the festival folds the last of its tents. Up on a hill, I get a bowl of soup from a kitchen in a volkswagen van. A small girl is rocking on her feet, repeating, almost chanting, *I hate soup, I hate soup, I hate soup.* A woman with big jewelry reaches out her hand, *I know you don't like soup and that's okay.* I am so struck by this that I stand still on my feet. I taste the soup. It is excellent soup. A young man approaches me, says my name, but I don't know him. When he carefully takes a piece of paper from his wallet, I realize he is one of the french boys from the soft green hill. Celia gave him a note, in the chance he might find me. She knew she wouldn't find me herself. *Celia was tired of hitchhiking*, he tells me, *and took a bus straight to the coast.* She's been there for weeks. I put the note unread in the pocket of my jeans.

Reclaim: I share the night with my guitar, and when I sleep the guitar sleeps beside me. I'm not ready to sleep yet and sit with a single candle under the stars. I am trying to write down a few things, to keep a record of these days but the wind keeps putting its hand over the flame. *Okay you want it dark, it will be dark* and I let the wick be and set myself to try something that needs no light, automatic writing. I have never done this before and sceptically leave my hand resting on the page, free to go wherever. I try to clear my mind of thought. In a minute a nudge then my

hand pushing across the page, doodling little circles, a compelling followed by a pause. Prepared to find nothing, I light the candle above the page only to see a word plainly written. *Reclaim.* Squelch the candle and put down the page. I feel the limit of something, a kind of line drawn at the edge of a life that marks the beginning of something larger. Around me the air feels too permeable, and who am I to think myself as big as the night? I roll the command through my fingers, but it is too vague: reclaim what? I can't aim my hands towards any destination. I blunder forward. Amnesia.

The rollerskaters: Celia's note I save until morning. *I hope you reach the ocean and I hope you find love,* it says. At a small store with a payphone out front, I wait for the operator to put through my call. In the distance, a young couple approaches, long legs wobbling on roller skates, young lovers. They come closer, become larger and they have a puppy in tow, large paws, wrinkly face, huge pink tongue. By the time they reach the store, they are laughing so hard that they hold onto a tree for support. The puppy jumps and licks their hands. In that moment waiting for my line to connect, the rollerskaters frame a kind of ideal for me. I could aspire to that if I tried, I could try, and then a great relief, to get my young brother on the line, no judgement. *Tell Dad I'll be home sooner than I said.* He asks if Celia will be with me and I know how she fills his teenage summer with dreams. Celia: his older sister's friend, the vivacious one, always laughing. *No,* and I am angry too quickly and can't explain, *tell you later.* The empty tent I wrap like a deflated shell and send back to the man in a bus that goes one direction. The balance of me, also a kind of shell, sits on a green bench, and waits for the bus back east.

Travelling west: Celia went west without me, and a phone call is an inadequate way to describe a car trashing a guardrail, careening the cliffs into the sea, but this is how it is done. I came back east, to become an artist who married an artist. Those are our canvasses stacked up in the hall, with their backs turned. Rousing myself from sleep, wearing a plaid housecoat, the stove broken again, the kitchen too cold and this impossible news of Celia. A set of words in which I hear the full sound of the car, the guardrail bursting, and then a kind of silence at the sea's mouth. A swallow. *When did this happen,* I ask not meaning the accident only, meaning all of this, the kitchen, the canvasses, the stove, when did all of this happen? Celia was travelling north on a highway when something terrible happened to her young body, her young body with the old heart in it. The phone rests in my cupped hands with the heavy weight of a gun. Geography fooled me. An axis shifted. Celia was travelling north, only to find west again.

Anne M. Kelly

Anatomy in the Bush

We're vultures and we're saviours,
the tow-truck driver said.
After patrol cars and ambulences, we pick up
unspeakable leftovers, stumble
over uneatable sandwiches, stuffed
animals, forgotten heads.

Once, climbing down into a ravine
to fetch a wreck, I found a vintage Ford
nestled in a patch of salal.
In the driver's seat:
a skeleton—male, grey-lichen
hatband circumnavigating the skull

at the latitude
of nasal cavities; a pocket-watch,
on what was once a lap, stopped
at five past nine.
He sat at attention, so upright
he might have been wired

to demonstrate the perfect lumbar
curvature of those who drive beyond
the point of exhaustion, both hands still
locked on the wheel. Beside him,
a female, her hair long, stagnant-
ochre as leaf mold.
And between
the woman and the man, tangled springs,
traces of a nest: the small, chipped end
of an egg, a handful of feathers.

jb Warren

Dali's Finches

My neighbour Dali has two little finches. A male that is small and grey with brown, black, red, and a little yellow, that must be really horny because there is always an egg on the floor of the cage, and a tiny white lady finch that doesn't think much of motherhood because she eats each egg shortly after she recovers from the laying. Dali keeps the cage in the corner of the living room dining room rectangle and the birds don't see anyone except when her children bring other children over to play and there are no cartoons on TV and everything else has been played with. Her children and my children sneak through the kitchen tiptoe to where the kitchen door meets the dining room and they peek their heads around the corner. Two, three, five, six, and eight year old heads naturally tiered watching the finches sitting there. There must be periods of really great activity (when they're fucking or being cannibals) but Dali says the kids have never seen that. She says not to worry because if they (the birds) ever started (fucking or killing) she would send my kids home, which I appreciate.

So when my kids come home I wonder, if it's not supper time yet, did her kids and my kids have a fight, or was the poor little white lady finch getting force fucked by the beautifully colored male. My kids walk past me where I'm standing in the door to the dining room waiting for a hug hello. Walk on through the kitchen forgetting to take off their shoes, and over the living room carpet. I send them to their rooms. They say I'm mean and they wish they could run away and never come home. I say I wish I was a finch in a cage.

Temples

Diza Sauers

This is their last chance to see Celso's car since the sun is setting and they can only see parts of the valley through slanting shadows. Down below, the whole world is small and far away and all the people Lena knows move around tiny like ants, busy picking things up and putting them back down. From up here, Lena can make everything small and easier to understand. Lena is a giant and this is her one step out. If she wants to, she can just reach out with one foot and crush the entire world underneath her, then keep on walking.

"We can crush them all with one giant step." Lena shouts, "Just one step!" Then she jumps as high as she can to show Kiva how easy it could be.

It would be that easy because down below the ranch spread out doesn't look much bigger than a page: a green patch of mazes where the gardens are, the bee hives and fruit trees, the main house, the bus, and across a narrow twig road is Old Garcia's trailer, neat and small as a plum. Lena can scoop it up in one handful and toss it into the wind. Just like that.

Up here, on the hill, the temple squats down near a tree and Lena stares at it fiercely. It is smaller after this summer's rains, melting back into the ground. To Lena, everything else is exactly the same, four crumbling adobe walls, one wall with a hole which could be a door, but the size of it has diminished. Their temple needs a roof. If it had a good, sturdy roof than it would stop fading away. Lena worries that soon her temple will be nothing but just a small pile of mud. If they had a roof it would stay the same size and nothing could get in unless they wanted it to. As it is, there are rules. No one can belong to their temple except Lena and Kiva. No one can go inside unless they are invited. They don't invite anyone.

Sometimes people visit but not because they are asked. Danny, Kiva's brother, comes to call Kiva home but he doesn't count because he's only eight and can barely see over the walls. Celso comes too, to bring beer. He's an artist and made the temple so they have to let him come in when he wants. He visits regularly to sit and talk and drink beer. He should be here now. Earlier in the afternoon he said he'd be back in an hour with beer and now the sun is going down. Lena looks back out over the ranch

for Celso's car. It is a game they play, to point out things they know, to put their finger over top of them, name them and make them their own. If Lena is first to see Celso's car down there on one of the roads, turning along past the ranch or circling back across the mesa then she can draw the line to bring him straight back up here. Then she wins.

"I don't see him in the car," Lena says looking carefully, sweeping her eyes from side to side. She announces this loudly into the air so that anyone can hear her, but Kiva isn't even playing. She leans against the wall biting her nails and not really seeing anything, not Lena, not the ranch, not the sky.

"Well he's not over there." Lena points, looking over at Old Garcia's trailer with no car in the yard. Old Garcia is Celso's aunt and sometimes she feeds him. "Maybe he's on his way back here and we just can't see him. Maybe he's behind a hill or down in a shadow or something."

Kiva chews her nails and stares off into the distance. Even though she is a year older than Lena, she is still Lena's best friend. Kiva is thirteen and hates her name and her house. Sometimes she makes Lena call her K. but other days she likes to be Sadie. She is tired of being called Kiva. Lena can understand that but at least Kiva has breasts. She has nice firm round ones which she doesn't hunch over. On Lena's chest there are only swollen bumps with a mole by her left nipple. She covers hers up and tries to ignore them. Kiva has long thick chestnut hair which she sweeps up off her neck and she spritzes her bangs so they fan straight up into the air. Lena just has stiff black hair that spirals out of her head and always snarls. Lena also thinks that one of her eyes is bigger than the other one which means she always has to make her one eye wider whenever she can remember. Lena feels short and wide, like a truck.

Kiva has been kissed, deeply, by a boy in the eighth grade. He used his tongue. When Kiva told Lena, she shuddered and Lena shuddered too. Lena has never been kissed by a boy, not on the mouth, not even by anyone in her own sixth grade class. Kiva knows terrible mysteries and drops them down on Lena usually when they are doing something else, like fixing up the temple or doing a chore. The last horrible secret that Kiva told her is still right there in Lena's head. Earlier this summer, they sat on the hill watching the Saturday Chants down below when Kiva took off her glasses. She wiped the lenses slowly in small circles, taking her time before she leaned forward and spoke quickly and low, in a hiss: "Men fold it up when they put their pants on. They arrange it first to one side or the other but it has to point up. I saw my father do it that way once," she said, then raised her head to stop Lena from coming any closer, "Don't ask me why."

Lena isn't sure how Kiva gets to see such things. Kiva's father hasn't

lived with her for years. The most Lena ever saw was her cousin laying on top of another cousin out on a patch in the field behind the bus. They thrashed around and Lena flattened herself out on the side of the bus and let only her eyes lean around the corner. Just her eyes watched as the girl reached down and rubbed the boy's crotch back and forth with her hand stretched out flat, but that was it. They kept their clothes on. Nobody folded or unfolded anything. She has heard the noises in the bus when her mother and Kent make the bus give slightly in the night but that, she thinks, is like the wind, just a deep sigh. She doesn't think that really counts since it is something that she has always known.

In the temple, they have two cups, three forks, a cracked pink glass jar and a mattress. Lena doesn't want the temple getting too cluttered up with other people's things. The bus she lives in is already crammed full of boxes and clothes and tables and chairs. She's had enough of other people's stuff and so has Kiva. They want their temple to be simple and clean. They have an altar on which they sometimes put flowers, apricots, some sagebrush, once an old shoe. For Lena, the most important part is that the temple is hers. She built the little mud stair out front and she keeps the pink glass jar of marbles by the window clean. Sometimes she comes up here alone and lies on the mattress and studies the trees and doesn't have to think about anyone else seeing her or asking her what she is doing. One of the games she and Kiva play is to think about what is ahead, they shape people and places out of the air and put themselves into them. Lena always builds an enormous house with three skylights, copper pans in the kitchen and a bathroom for every room. There is a garage but it is too small for any buses. The only cars in there are sleek and colorful with fins. Kiva doesn't really care about a house so long as she has a beautiful, tan husband and can attend veterinary school. Usually they play different games for hours but since Kiva is being such a pill, Lena keeps a look out for Celso.

Celso is one of their favorite people because he is tall and handsome and sleeps in the back seat of his 1953 DeSoto. His car has a push button ignition, tubes in the radio and pink transmission fluid. When the car works its dashboard glows green. It can start without a key. Celso can turn the whole starter unit and it kicks over, rumbling, trembling, waiting to take them for short drives when they get to sit on Celso's lap and steer. He takes them out for ice cream and fried chicken. Celso always wears white t-shirts and faded black jeans and boots with silver tips. He comes to sit and drink beer with them up in the temple because he is an artist. Celso's calling is to be an artist but he can't afford the paints or

brushes or canvas so the girls help him find stuff in trash dumpsters. He likes car batteries, beer bottles and tuna fish cans. He builds sculptures and when he finishes them he puts them back into the dumpsters for poor people to find. He says that poor people need art too. Lena knows callings are important. Once, Lena's father, Bear, saved Celso's life. He pulled him from a frozen river when Celso was only twelve. She has known Celso all her life. They are distant relations but no one has ever explained to her exactly how they are related. He has a mustache.

High on her hill, Lena watches the sun slide down behind the mountain without pausing and she watches her shadow stretch out behind her. Down below one last ray catches Garcia's sad trailer and flashes it into a dark shining dot. Lena covers it with her finger and pictures Old Garcia in her trailer with her face probably mashed up against the screen, staring over at the ranch, maybe even looking up at them up in the temple, high on the hill. Just this morning Lena had been that small, smaller than the tip of her finger down inside Old Garcia's trailer helping her with the apricots.

On Saturdays, Old Garcia pays the girls to come and help her out with odd jobs that she might have. She keeps her money in her sleeve rolled up in a wad of tissue. Usually she gives them one dollar to share. Today she had apricots that needed to be made into jam, six paper sacks full of apricots that Lena and Kiva helped her pick the week before. Old Garcia couldn't pick them herself since she's too fat to fit in and out of her door. She stays inside her trailer, floating around in her big, blue dress looking like a glistening, pale planet, a Jupiter in her window.

She's been in there now for as long as Lena can remember. Old Garcia used to be able to fit in and out of the door but one winter she stayed in too long eating pancakes and pinto beans and when spring came she couldn't get back out. She doesn't really mind. Her husband is dead but her children bring her food. She says that the world isn't everything it's cracked up to be, that it used to be a better place. She remembers how it used to be; it's just fine with her to be inside looking out.

This morning Lena stood outside the trailer first on one foot then the other wanting to knock but not knocking because she was early. Inside the trailer were scrapings and faint rustlings, water rushing through pipes and the squeak of a door. Lena wanted to be first this morning, before Kiva, so that she could see the animals and have Old Garcia to herself. Old Garcia always helps Lena remember the things that are easy to forget. Old Garcia remembers Lena's father, Bear, before he died. She remembers Bear when Bear was small. She even has a picture of Bear

when he was grown and held Lena in his arms, when Lena was just fat and pink, slumped on his shoulder with her fist in her mouth. Old Garcia remembers all the times that Lena's mother forgot.

A window slid open and steam floated out as Old Garcia rumbled "Come in, come in," through the screen, her head sweaty and pale. Old Garcia sat by her window in her big chair, her bald head floating against the light. Lena didn't stare at the fine matting of wispy white hair on the top of Garcia's head or the way that she carried her wig from the living room chair to the kitchen sink then back over to the window. Lena only nodded when Old Garcia arranged the wig carefully on the back of a chair and talked to it too.

Old Garcia's trailer was jammed with animals and birds flying, leaping, swooping, glaring, nailed to the floor. Old Garcia's dead husband was a taxadermist and after he died Old Garcia kept the best specimens, for the memories. She could tell all the stories of how these heads and bodies came to live here, wedged in between the furniture, staring into dark rooms, gathering dust on her shelves. It was Lena's secret, imagining them alive again for the instant that she touched them. She could look beyond their glass eyes and polished hooves, dusty feathers and worn beaks back to what they used to be.

First, Lena said hello to Curly, the stuffed armadillo with broken, shiny claws and sewn shut eyes. She patted him gently once on the back and set him free floating across a river. She made her rounds, nodding to the deer head mounted on the wall with one cracked eye, the eagle with his wings spread flying down from the ceiling with his talons stretched out and the hopeful prairie dog perched on the bookshelf. Lena loved the tiny claws in his clasped black hands best of all. She gave each animal a place to live although some had nicer houses than others. Curly had a magnificent burrow with a large oak table and a red wingback chair while the eagle just had a lonely rock. The prairie dog had a skylight in his small hole and a small china set with little blue teacups and saucers. Lena spoke directly to each of them asking specific questions which she already knew the answers to. Of course, she could do this without moving her lips. When she was done, she always did the lizard and frog last, she circled back across the room, ignoring the large bear raised up on his hind legs standing in the corner. Old Garcia's husband used it as a hat rack, but since he died and Old Garcia never went out, the bear had acquired coats, hats, scarves, umbrellas and a cane. Even buried beneath a mountain of clothes, Lena could still feel his eyes following her around the room. She walked around him on the other side of the room and sat down across from Old Garcia.

Old Garcia studied at her for a moment, like she didn't recognize her. She worked her teeth. "Let's sort the bags while we wait," she finally

said and shifted in her chair. Lena carried the sacks in from the kitchen and set them on the floor. They pulled the rotten apricots out and put them in different piles: one for the firm ripe ones, one for the hard, green ones and one for the hopelessly bruised. Lena liked working with Garcia because while they worked she would tell stories, whatever came into her mind. Sometimes it would be about a recipe or a prayer or a photograph. Sometimes it would be about someone Lena had never heard of before. Lena would half way listen and let her mind drift around the room, all the hooves and feathers, the glass eyes watching, the ears still. Sometimes she thought if she unfocused her eyes they would shift or move, dart from one shadow to another.

Once, when she was small, Lena stood outside Old Garcia's trailer in the dark. She wanted to go in to sit and talk but it was late. There was only a dim light on inside. She knew she shouldn't, but Lena climbed up on a block and peeked in through the window. Old Garcia was nothing more than an enormous shadow dancing on the wall. She moved and swayed and Lena, tired, rested her head on her arms before she saw that there were two shadows dancing on the wall. Old Garcia and a larger dark shadow spinning and turning on the wall. It took Lena a moment to realize that one of the shadows had ears, that it was the lumbering bear and Old Garcia, their arms around one another, their bodies holding one another up. She watched the shadows growing large and small, sliding around the wall, the two of them waltzing gently around the room, floating on impossible, weightless feet.

"Are you hungry?" Old Garcia asked and Lena nodded slowly. She set a green apricot in the underripe pile. Old Garcia shook cookies out of a wrinkled paper bag into a blue dish, talking all the time about the apricots, her goat, the neighbors. "Have one," she insisted, holding out a plate of Mexican wedding balls and the stale pink icing cookies. Lena took one of the wedding balls and licked it. She waited for Old Garcia to eat. No one ate as politely and delicately as Old Garcia, her hands plump and beautiful, moving food up to her mouth like she was going to sing; then it disappeared. She chewed slowly and steadily watching Lena.

Old Garcia would tell Lena whatever story she wanted to hear even though she already knew them all. Every one of those animals was stuffed tight with memories, nailed down with stories even though they all had the same ending. Lena knew the story about the lynx and about the owl. She knew the story about Curly and the deer head. She even knew the story about the fat trout mounted on the polished chestnut board.

Lena's father, Bear, caught that fish from the same river that he pulled Celso out of the time he fell through the ice. Lena knew the story by

heart; it was in the winter that Bear felt the ice creak right up his leg and when he looked back there was only Celso's head and his red mittens, reaching up through the sheets of broken ice and splashing water; later that spring he pulled a fish from the same bank on the river and it became Celso and Bear's joke. Celso had his uncle mount the trout but now no one wanted it around except for Old Garcia. Lena ran this story over and over in her head, adding bits and pieces. She liked the part best when Bear pulled Celso out of the water and held him close to him to keep him warm. Her father was always warm. He probably gave Celso his coat, a big, red coat with a wool lining, so that Celso wouldn't freeze and die. Her father could handle a little cold, the winter air probably didn't make him do anything more than blow in his hands a couple of times.

"Tell me the fish story again," Lena said.

"Which fish is that, dear?" Old Garcia fingered another cookie.

"That one," Lena pointed at the stiff fish on the board.

Garcia nodded and began slowly, "It was in the summer, a long time ago when the waters were sluggish and low. The rains were late. No one caught anything out of the rio that summer but Celso. It was a hot, hot day when he left the house with just..."

"No, Garcia, that fish there," Lena pointed again.

Old Garcia stopped and stared at the fish for a moment then looked back at Lena. For a moment Lena didn't recognize it either. It was smaller and duller, but she knew the story. "Don't you remember?" she asked. "That is my father's fish."

"Oh, really." Old Garcia stopped with a cookie half way up to her mouth, "I don't think so...let me see." And she chewed for a minute, "Let me see...maybe so, maybe so," she said. She sorted several apricots quickly, none were bruised.

Lena ate quietly and looked out the window, down at the bend she could see the familiar shape of Celso's car starting down the road, starting toward them. "They're here," she said, and set the rest of her cookie down on her napkin. She was full. She wanted Kiva and Celso to come in and help with the apricots. Kiva would remember the story the right way and Celso would tell Garcia all about the fish. They would remember. She swallowed.

Lena watched as the car got closer and closer. She could see both Kiva's and Celso's heads floating dark through the windshield. The car pointed right toward the trailer, but then they leaned into the curve, and swept by, not slowing or turning. They passed close enough for Lena to see, Celso and Kiva, their mouths moving like they were both talking or singing a song. They didn't even look over at the trailer but Celso beeped twice the way he always did, one two.

Lena sat perfectly still and watched the car turn into dust and sail out of sight. She looked at her cookie then back at Garcia who was chewing and studying something small on the floor.

"They aren't coming," Lena said and looked at the paper bags lined up in a row in the kitchen, a little juice seeped and stained the bottom of one of them. "They must be going somewhere else." Lena studied the barnyard owl sitting on the television set with feather tufts for ears. She didn't like it and she didn't like the stupid lynx nailed down to the board with his yellow teeth bared either. "They have something important to do," she said. She would remember what it was soon.

Lena worked very hard, moving quickly, deciding which pile her hands should dart to: ripe, bruised or green. When they finished, Old Garcia said she was too tired to make jam. Lena was glad because she wanted to be alone, she wanted to go up to the temple.

"This is for you," Old Garcia said when they were finished. Lena hoped for some of the money that she kept in her sleeve but instead Old Garcia handed Lena a greasy bag and an iron pan with some matches. Inside the bag there was bologna, cheese, tortillas, butter, some apricots and stale cookies. "Thank you," she mumbled then turned to go. Sometimes Lena stayed at Old Garcia's doorway long enough to show her how easy it could be to go in and out, in and out the door, but not today. Today she waved over her shoulder once and started out on her way. Beyond the row of old apricot trees was her hill jutting up black into the sky. She set out for her trail.

On the path Lena thought she heard voices, Kiva's voice and Celso's laugh but when she called to them she heard nothing but some trees creaking and the hum of cars far away. Lena thought about Celso's car rolling right on by and Kiva's pale white face staring straight ahead. She thought about Old Garcia and the fish and all the apricots that didn't become jam. By the time she reached the top of the hill she set her bag and skillet down, she didn't want to see anyone, not Kiva or Celso, no one.

But there they were. Celso had his shirt off tied around his waist and he had a dark spiral of hair down his belly. Kiva was hunched on the wall with her glasses off, rubbing them on the edge of her jacket. Her hair was a mess.

"Hey, look at that." Celso called and waved Lena over. Kiva jumped like she heard a loud noise but didn't look up. They were watching the cows down at the ranch walk from one side of the field, look out the fence and turn around and walk back the other way.

"They've been doing it for hours now," Celso said.

"Back and forth," Kiva added.

"Oh? How long have you been here?" Lena asked. Neither of them

said anything. Celso handed Lena his beer and shifted over closer to Kiva to make more room.

Check it out," he said, "They know something that we don't know, that's why they keep going from side to side like that." Kiva nodded and said, "Yeah."

Lena watched with them for a while. The cows walked along eating, mouthing the grass, lipping up flowers, wandering from one side of the pasture to where the fence was, then they'd stop, stare through the fence, turn around and go back the other way. "I thought they did that because they were stupid," she said and sipped her beer.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Lena." Kiva still wouldn't look at her, she just held her hand out for the beer. They all stood there for a while until Celso said he'd go buy more.

Lena doesn't try and figure out who the headlights belong to down below, small and dim, turning in different directions. The sun is down and Celso took too long to come back. Lena is tired of waiting. She has better things to do. Kiva is helping her form a stone ring so they can build a little fire.

"Well I'm glad I'm not down there tonight," Lena says, jumping on a large branch hanging off a log. It cracks off. "I'm glad I'm up here. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

Kiva doesn't say anything. Lena can tell by the way that she looks that she wants to say something horrible, she has a watery look like her face could melt, but she doesn't say anything. She snaps sticks down into smaller and smaller pieces and puts them in neat stacks.

"You missed Old Garcia's today," Lena says. "The food is mine." She looks at Kiva out of the corner of her eye, "But I'll probably share." Kiva keeps stacking her twigs in neat little stacks. It takes Lena a couple of tries to get her fire to light, it keeps smoking and going out. When it finally takes, it flares up and she can see around her, Kiva, the tree behind her, the temple beyond that. Kiva chews her lip, drops some needles down onto the flame then rocks back on her heels.

"I don't think we should let anyone into the temple any more," she says slowly. "I mean any men," then she adds quickly, "or boys. And I think we should take out that mattress too." They move back from the fire which flames too high. Kiva adds in a low voice, "That mattress looks terrible. It's too big." Her voice drops to a whisper, "It's so white. I hate it." She glares at Lena for a moment and narrows her eyes at her like she has said something important. Then she looks at the sky for a long time like there is something up there.

Lena thinks about the mattress. It never bothered her before. She can tell by the way Kiva is talking that she should understand how terrible the

mattress is now but she doesn't. She walks up to look at it, but in the dark it just glows a dim white. She feels around for the bag of food. She can think while she's cooking.

Lena dumps everything out and lines it up: the tortillas, bologna, cheese, cookies and the apricots. She gives Kiva the smallest apricot. She unfolds the bologna from the bag. "I think that the best way to eat fried bologna is outside from a hot iron pan," she says brightly, then sets the pan on the fire. "Don't you?"

Down below, small fires start to dot the field on the ranch for Saturday Chants. From down below they can hear the first faint chants starting out like a buzz then rising up on the end like question after question. "I hate that shit," Lena says around a mouthful of sandwich. On the path they hear a crashing and grunt and the clink of bottles as someone stumbles up the path. Kiva doesn't say anything. She chews faster and swallows. She turns her back to the path and Lena bites her sandwich and watches. Someone shoves branches aside and loses their way for a moment, then finds it again.

"Hey," Danny says and pushes his small white face into the light, his arm around a large paper sack, he pants and wipes back his stringy hair.

"Christ," Kiva says, "What are you doing here? Can't you leave me alone?"

Danny breathes deeply. "Celso sent me," he says. "Beer." He raises his arms.

"What?" Kiva asks.

"I saw him earlier and he said to bring this up to you guys and that he can't make it. Something about. . . I don't remember. Something." Danny sets the beer down and squats down beside Lena. "Smells good."

Lena doesn't really listen too closely to Kiva or Danny because they always fight. She eats her tortilla and watches the tiny ceremonial fires lighting up down below. She tries to guess where she will see the next red dot glow but she can't. They happen wherever she isn't looking. She thinks about the fish that Old Garcia can't remember. She's not sure how things like that can happen, like Kiva and Celso riding right by this afternoon, how things can just disappear and turn up when you aren't looking for them. She tries to figure out how something you've known all your life can change, turn into something you don't recognize, like it has a life of its own. She doesn't really listen to Danny until Kiva slugs him in the shoulder and screams, "I DID NOT! I DID NOT! Whoever said that is a liar!" Danny shifts closer to Lena and rolls his eyes.

"God, you are so gross," Kiva says and pops open a beer.

Danny shrugs and says, "Celso says to tell you 'Later'," and he rolls

his eyes and blows a kiss into the air. Kiva slouches down and ignores both Lena and Danny. She smoothes her hair.

Lena starts to feel something shifting inside of her, like she is falling off the edge of a high place and can't catch herself. It takes her a moment to grab hold of what is moving away from her. Kiva looks different to her, as if she is very far away instead of sitting there right across the fire. Lena feels cold. When she closes her eyes she sees Celso standing there without his shirt and that line of dark hair dropping down his belly. She sees Kiva's flushed face and her hands polishing her glasses, the warm beer and the mattress. She feels small and stupid. Everything seems smaller to her. She fixes her eyes on the fire because she is sure that in the dark behind her the temple is shrinking too.

In her head, Lena searches to find a way to stop everything from slipping away. The only thing that still looks the same to her that hasn't changed is Danny. He still has a snotty nose and dark circles under his eyes. He knocks his knees together and watches the food and he looks exactly the same as he always has.

"Do you want to be part of the temple?" Lena asks. Kiva starts to say something, but Lena just stares at her until she stops. Danny nods his head slowly up and down. Kiva drains her beer, snorts and tosses the can into the fire.

"Do you?" asks Lena.

"Yes," he says so softly she can barely hear him.

"What?"

"Yes I want to belong."

"Then close your eyes."

Lena is on a high cliff and Danny looks small, white and skinny near the fire. His bony chest heaves up and down, his feet root into the ground. Lena thinks that he could be perched in Old Garcia's trailer except that his skin is too tight for his body. His is a story she can change, one that hasn't been forgotten. Looking at Danny with firelight on his face, Lena tries to trace how she ended up here at the end of the day with all the things she knows so well wobbly and remote. She has to step carefully to reach all the way to where Danny is standing with his eyes closed, facing the night. By herself, Lena will have to put things back where they belong.

He smells like little boy, like mud and bird nests and smoke. He trembles and he makes his hands into loose, anxious fists down by his sides. Lena grabs his fists and holds them then kisses him hard on the mouth. Beneath her tongue she can feel his lips but mostly he is teeth, squirming ribs and a yell. She starts to reach her hand down his belly but he wrenches himself away and spits, wipes his mouth.

"Forget it!" he yells and then backs away, falls, scrambles to the other side of the fire. Kiva stares, dropping her beer down between her legs. Danny looks around him and picks up a stick from the fire, "Just stay there!" he screams and starts to back away. He turns and runs off into the night holding his fire stick above him, an orange dot bobbing in the dark, bouncing crazily up and down as he disappears down the trail, spelling out a secret message in the night.

"Shit," Kiva whispers, "What you do that for?"

"Because it's our temple," Lena says, "And if you want to belong. . ." and she doesn't really have anything else to say so she says, "It's ours."

Kiva shrugs and sips her beer. "What if he asks you why you did that?" Kiva still follows the small orange dot bobbing down the hill.

Lena doesn't have anything more to say. She studies her feet and it comes to her, the words, "He won't remember it that way. We'll just tell him that we meant something else."

Kiva stands still for a minute then shrugs. She walks up to the temple and sits on the wall. She opens another beer and starts playing the game. "I can see Old Garcia's," she says. And Lena joins her. They sit there and name the things that they can see: the black trees, Danny's orange dot, the big bonfire fire and all the little ones.

As they name them, Lena lights them on fire with her finger. She starts with a small line of fire creeping up from behind the rings of small fires until she makes a whole wall of fire walking up toward the ceremony, burning down the big fields, the house and the barn. She points her finger and she makes the orange line move a little faster now through the garden and up along the trees, she might leave an escape wall for anyone smart enough to find it but the hole is too small for a car. All the cars must burn. She swings the fire over to the other side of the pasture and marches it over to the road. Across the road, she knows, is Old Garcia's trailer. Inside she pictures Old Garcia, dozing in her arm chair by the window, everything glowing orange inside, her cheek clammy in her hand, the bear rising up behind her under his mound of coats. Lena can see all the other animals, caught and exposed, the firelight flickering in the center of all their glass eyes. She points her finger the other way, turns the fire and keeps it on the opposite side of the road. She walks it up and over to the river where it drowns.

"There," she whispers and makes a fist.

"Yes, there he goes," Kiva points to Danny's red dot as it struggles across the field, out of the black and back to the ceremony.

"Yes," Lena says. "He's gone."

Kim Carter

Pill thoughts

The moon is a giant birth control pill.
The clouds open and swallow faithfully.
No stars are born tonight.
The sky chooses to be defiant and barren.

I am on the ground
swallowing Triphasil 21.
It tastes like dust,
the sadness of the moon.
Now my ovaries shake out
their dry messages to my womb.
Ten years of dark nights and pills
these organs must feel ancient as planets.
It is black. I am getting old.
I think I want stars shining down there.

Roman Fever

This bus is an aquarium,
we girls, like fishes
o-mouthed at the screaming Roman world outside,
perilous with vespas and olive eyes.

In the smog of the seven hills,
we virgins turn listless
over the litany of museums.
We shriek for gelati, encourage shadows
to descend with us
to catacombs and caves of churches.
Thick air flirts
threatening the melting shrines,
suddenly our temperatures rise.

"It's Roman fever,"
mutters our teacher.
"Listen: It will get you pregnant.
Stop smiling!"
But we can't. In the Pantheon
we dance around the shadowy edges,
our hands outstretched in the dome of light.

Asma

Nighat Majid

Asma sat on the floor by the bed, elbow on the edge of the bed, her face resting in the nook of her arm. She stared at the quilt which moved up and down in tune with the shallow breathing coming from her child lying under it. An oil lantern stood by the bed on a rust-laden tin of Nido milk powder and threw a furtive light around, which almost drowned in the thick darkness of the small room. Once in a while the meager flame of the lantern flickered, as if gathering a store of energy unbeknownst to itself. It grew to twice its size, and for a time the gigantic darkness of the room was defeated. But as soon as the momentary flicker of the flame retreated, darkness, heavy and silent, engulfed the room again. Asma watched over the child with weary eyes. She had been sitting by the bed since her husband had stormed out of the hut angry with her for she had served him nothing with his evening meal except bread with onion slices.

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There had still been some light filtering in from outside when he had left. But the dying light had soon given way to night. Asma had got up to light the lantern. The child was asleep or, perhaps, awake but silent with her eyes closed. She was a strange little girl. She never spoke much. Asma had learned to accept her silence with time but it irritated the girl's father. In his presence she never said a word although she might speak a few words with her mother when he was not around.

Night came. People emerged from their huts like nocturnal insects out in search of food. Women held back inside their homes by the heat of the day and men who had been away at work emerged into the narrow lane running through the haphazard arrangements of tiny huts on either side of it. Asma heard, in an absent-minded way, footsteps going past her door, voices exchanging greetings, women gossiping, scolding their children,

children crying, the colony boys fighting among themselves. She knew most of these voices. In a colony like theirs there was very little of one's life that remained private. All that separated Asma's own little world from the world outside was a cotton curtain that hung in the doorway of her one-room home. The print had large red roses. She had got it made when she had first come to the hut as a new bride. Now it hung loosely, had holes; the roses had grown rust-colored in four years, with exposure to sun, dust and age.

Then the voices outside had begun to die; people were retreating to their homes to rest for the night. Silence began to grow; the dogs came out. Though none of them had any individual owners, the colony was their home, and they guarded it as part of their unspoken duty. This guarding mostly meant holding long and protracted arguments among members of their own species when the humans had deserted the streets at night.

The dogs, when they had tired of their debate, turned in for the day. The night was growing cooler. Asma covered the child up to the neck with the quilt and touched her forehead to check if the fever had subsided. The child's forehead was hot to the touch, hotter tha it had been earlier that evening, and this sparked off a new wave of anxiety in the mother's heart. The fever was not getting any better despite the medicine that she had brought from Dr. Shah's clinic that morning and had given to the girl as the compounder had instructed her, thrice, with hot milk.

It must have been quite late at night when her husband returned. He did not say anything to her but waited in silence while she got his bed ready. Usually he slept on the bed while the mother and daughter slept on the floor, but since the girl's illness, Asma had asked him if he could sleep on the floor. He had not objected because he did care for his daughter and would have laughed and played with her sometimes if the child did not always seem so afraid of him. "Why does she act as if I am not her father but some monster?" he would ask Asma. Asma had no good answer to that question. She would say nothing in reply. Maybe the child was afraid of him just as she herself was afraid of him. He was a big, strong man with a forbidding moustache which tickled and repelled Asma on those nights when he demanded her body which she yielded unto him in a gesture which was neither indifference nor excitement, not love nor sadness, but simple acceptance of her responsibility as a married woman.

She spread a sheet on the floor and placed a pillow on it and then went back to her position by the bed. He laid down and covered himself completely with another sheet so that no part of his face or body was visible. He did this to avoid the mosquitoes. Soon he was asleep and his heavy

breathing interrupted by loud, gasping snores was the only noise that remained other than the almost inaudible breathing of the child coming from the bed.

Asma sat on the floor between the man and the child, with her eyes fixed on the child's face, which appeared sallow and deathly in the yellow light of the lantern. She wondered if the medicine Dr. Shah had given her would ever work. Or was the fruit seller right after all? What if her little girl died? What if God did not pull her through as He had done at all other times? Another poor woman's daughter dead—would it matter to God? To Dr. Shah? After all so many children in the colony died. Their mothers always cried and wailed but then they said it was God's will and they went about their lives as usual and soon God gave them more children.

But it didn't seem like God was going to give her any more children. For the past three years she had been hoping to have another child, a son perhaps, that would make her husband happy and proud in the eyes of the other men in the colony. She had gone to the midwife in the colony, the one who had delivered her daughter, and discussed the problem with her. The midwife said it was God's will and had sent her to the holy man, the 'pir sahib' who came from his village every so often and sat under the old tree at one end of the colony. Among a throng of women surrounding the pir sahib Asma had tried to whisper in his ear: she wanted to make her husband happy with another child, a son. The pir had given her a "tawiz" and told her to wear it around her neck at all times but especially when her husband desired her to perform her wifely duty. "Daughter, you will see, God will bless you with a son. Sain baba's tawiz are blessed with strange powers. Wear it at all times and soon your womb will bear life." She did not know what the pir sahib meant by "soon" but it had been three years and still her womb had borne no life. She had not gone back to the pir sahib again though he had visited the colony many times. "The fault must be mine. I have grown barren. Or the tawiz would have worked by now," she told herself.

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She could not get the conversation with the fruit seller out of her mind. She had met him soon after her visit to the doctor that morning. Dr. Shah's clinic was situated just outside the colony on a busy street. The doctor was a middle-aged man with very little hair on his head and was immensely popular with the women folk of the colony. They swore his medicines always worked and made them and their children well. Dr.

Shah's clinic was open during the mornings for women patients only and, in the evenings, he took care of his male clients. His patients were mostly the poor and lower class workers who lived in the adjacent colony.

Asma had gone to him alone because she did not think her daughter was strong enough to walk the mile or so to the clinic in the heat. She had asked her neighbor, Miran, to come and sit with the girl while she went to get the medicine. Dr. Shah had not waited for her to finish telling him of her account of the child's illness. She was in the middle of saying, "she has not wanted to eat anything for the past three days," when Dr. Shah handed her a piece of paper on which he had scribbled something and said, "get this medicine from my compounder outside," and motioned her to the door.

The "compounder" sat in the outer waiting area behind a wooden counter. He appeared absorbed in reading something. He was a fat man with oily, combed-back hair, and a golden watch on his hairy wrist. He looked up from the magazine he was reading after Asma had been standing in front of his desk for sometime. He held out a hairy arm and grabbed the piece of paper she was holding. He then disappeared through a door behind him. Asma's eye caught the picture of a beautiful woman in the magazine. She bent forward slighty to get a better look at her. "She must be a film star," she muttered to herself. "Oh, how can these women be so beautiful?" she sighed as she stole a last look at the creamy complexion of the film star. She straightened abruptly as the compounder reappeared with a bottle filled with some pink stuff. Handing the bottle and the piece of paper back to her he said, "That will be twenty rupees." That was surely too much, just for a bottle of medicine. But Miran had warned her: "Shah is a good doctor. That's why he is so expensive." She quietly untied the knot at the end of her chadar and handed him two ten rupee notes. He deposited the money in a drawer and resumed reading his magazine. She stood uncertainly, staring at the bottle in her hand. How many times was she supposed to give this medicine to her daughter? She had not been told. She finally gathered enough courage to disturb the compounder again. "Sahib, how many times do I give this to my daughter?" she asked hesitatingly.

The "sahib," whom she had addressed so respectfully, glanced up from his magazine. His frown told her that he did not care for interruptions. He folded the magazine and setting it on top of the counter, said, "Sister, why ask me? Didn't the doctor sahib tell you?"

She shook her head. The doctor had said nothing to her.

"Let me see that piece of paper," he said, exasperated, and thrust his hairy arm out to her once again and grabbed the piece of paper she was holding. "Look here sister," he said pointing to a spot on the paper where

the doctor had scribbled. "Three times a day, one big spoon each time. Understand?" and he returned the paper to her.

"Yes sahib. Thank you. Now I understand. The doctor sahib probably just forgot to tell me," she said, folding the piece of paper and tying it into a knot at her chadar's end.

She threw a quick glance around the room at the other patients. There were several women and children sitting on a long bench along the wall opposite the compounder's station. They were busy chatting among themselves and, fortunately, had not paid much attention to her conversation with the compounder. Asma felt ashamed that the compounder had talked to her rudely; surely he knew that she could not read. She could not think of one woman in the colony who could read or write. Not one. "Then why give us these pieces of paper," she wondered. "Why not just tell us what to do and what harm can it do them if they were a little polite?"

The compounder seemed to have felt her thoughts because he looked up from the magazine and said, in a tone, softer than before, "This bottle should last you five days. Come back if the fever is not gone by then. Give the child some fruits and milk. No oily food. Understand?"

"Yes, sahib. Thank you. God bless you," she said to him, grateful that he had at last talked to her as if she were human. "If God wills my girl will soon be better." Silently she prayed that she may never have to return to see the doctor or his compounder again. If she had not had the irrational fear that Guddi may not survive this time without proper medicine, she would not have suffered to come here in the first place. People like Dr. Shah and the compounder made her feel uneasy and ashamed. They made her feel less than human.

Arranging the chadar on her head which had slipped down to her neck, she stepped out of the dark air of the clinic into the white sunshine outside. She walked along the street to the milk shop. It was a typical July day: the air was thick with moisture but there was no sign of rain. The heat had grown oppressive; the sun's rays darted around like arrows piercing the skin like needles. It was just mid-morning but already the day appeared wearied from the heat and humidity. At the milk shop she asked for a half liter of milk. The shopkeeper handed her a polythene bag filled with milk and said, "three rupees." She set the pink bottle on the counter and untied the knot at the end of the chadar. She had set out from home with twenty-five rupees which her husband had given her that morning. Twenty of these the compounder had taken away. Now she had a single five rupee note left. She clutched it in her hand for a moment before handing it over. The shopkeeper returned two one rupee notes to her.

They were crumpled and smelled of sweat from all the hands that had handled them. In contrast to the crisp new ten rupee notes she had had, these looked small and used. She left the shop holding the milk in one hand and the medicine in the other.

The street was in the midst of its usual commotion. Cars honked their way impatiently through a crowd of unruly pedestrians, bicyclists, motor rickshaws and vendors, who swerved to the right or left like flies to let a motorist pass and then returned to occupy the street as before. Asma crossed over to a fruit seller standing with his cart under a tree. For a moment she had debated between spending the two remaining rupees on fruit or buying vegetables for the evening meal. She knew her husband would not be pleased when he found out she had spent the day's grocery money on going to the doctor and buying fruit and milk for the girl. She could hear him say, "rich people's whims" when he learned she had been to the doctor: "God made her sick. God will make her well. No one used to waste money on doctors in the village." He always laughed at her for her "rich people's ways" when she tried to dress the girl in clean clothes, and trimmed and cleaned her nails, and bathed her every other day even though water was scarce. He said she had picked up these habits working in the rich people's home. When the child would come down with fever as she often did, he would say, "it's all this bathing that makes her sick." Asma felt the child's sickness had not much to do with bathing. She felt if she could buy better food for the girl, milk and fruits, and meat and fish, which she herself had had plenty of in the village before the drought came and forced her family out to the city, the girl might be healthier. But here in the city things were expensive. She often had to scheme and somehow save a few rupees from the money her husband gave her to buy milk for the child.

Once Asma had taken the girl with her to visit her old mistress, the "memsahib" for whom Asma had worked for four years before she got married. When she had hinted of hard times, memsahib had presented her with some money and a large tin of Nido milk powder for the child. The milk had lasted three or four months but once it was over, the tin came to be used for storing flour and in the evenings it served as a lantern stand. Asma had felt awkward to go back to ask for more help. She had hoped the memsahib would remember her maid, at least in Ramadan or Eid, of her own accord. But, memsahib had forgotten to repeat her generosity.

Asma's efforts had not succeeded in restoring her girl to health. She had always been a sickly child and the recurring bouts of fever had reduced her to a skeleton in the past year or two. Her skin hung about her

loosely. Her large hollow eyes were old with an unspoken misery. They made her look much older than her three years. When she was well, the girl would sit on the floor of the hut, listlessly holding a ragged doll that Asma had given her, and follow her mother with her eyes as she went about her daily chores.

Asma was waiting hesitantly by the fruit cart. The fruit seller was weighing out plump, yellow mangoes for another customer. She could not buy mangoes, not with two rupees. She waited till the other customer had left.

"How much are these for?" she asked pointing to a heap of small melons.

"Six rupees a kilo," came the short reply as the seller eyed her clothes, weighing her ability to buy.

"Weigh this one for me," she said, handing him a small ripe melon she had picked out from the pile.

"It's a little more than half a kilo but I'll sell it to you for three rupees," he said, removing the melon from the balance.

"Three rupees for such a small melon! Brother, you're not selling fruit, you're selling gold. Here, I'll give you two rupees for it and no more," she said, extending her arm across the cart to hand him the two rupees. She felt surprised, yet pleased with her own brave statement.

"Sister, if I sell it to you for two rupees, what profit should I make? How will I live?" he said, putting back the melon on top of the pile.

Asma withdrew her outstretched hand and stood quietly for a moment or two. She knew she should just turn and leave. She had not the skill to haggle with the fruit seller. She almost turned to go but in that instant she recalled the parting words of the compounder. No, Guddi must have some fruit. She decided she was going to try one last time to wrench some pity from the man.

"Brother, times are hard for the poor. My child is sick. This fruit—it's for her," she said, lowering her eyes so as not to meet his. She stood rooted to the spot while all the shame of her situation burned in her cheeks and even in her soul. It seemed to her a long time had elapsed before the man responded.

"Alright, give me the two rupees and take the melon," he said abruptly and handed her the fruit in a plastic bag with a quick movement as if afraid he might change his mind if he didn't hurry.

She placed the milk and the medicine in the bag with the melon and had turned to go when the man called her back.

He was saying: "That medicine is from Shah's clinic, isn't it? I've been here selling fruit for two years now and seen so many people like you walk by with those same pink bottles. He's no doctor. All the shopkeep-

ers around here say he used to be a compounder. Just bought himself a false doctor's certificate so he can come here and suck poor people's blood. Take your child to some real doctor in the Civic Hospital."

Asma heard him, turned around and looked in his face. Was he telling the truth? And why would he lie to her? But what about all those women in the colony who swore by Dr. Shah's medicines? Even Miran said he was good. And Miran was no fool. She remembered how quickly the compounder had come back with the bottle of medicine as if there was only one medicine to give out for all diseases. But even if this fruit seller was right about Dr. Shah, she had not money to take her daughter to one of the big hospitals. There they were sure to charge her at least four times as much as Shah did. She left the fruit seller without making any comment.

When she returned home, Miran was looking impatient to leave. Asma's girl was lying in bed with her eyes fixed at the ceiling. Asma went up to the bed and sitting down beside the girl, said to Miran, who was arranging her chadar over head while holding an infant in one arm, "Miran, tell me something. What sort of a man is Dr. Shah?"

Miran replied as if this was the most idiotic question she had been asked. "Why, child, what do you care what sort of a man he is? He's a good doctor, that's all that matters, I should think."

"Yes Miran. But a man told me he's not a real doctor."

"People love to gossip. They are jealous of Shah's success. Only last year my Munni had such diarrhea. You remember, don't you?"

"And you took her to Shah sahib?", Asma interrupted eagerly.

"Of course. It was his medicine that saved her."

"I hope his medicine saves my Guddi too. Look," she said, producing the pink bottle from her bag, "I paid twenty rupees for this." There was a touch of pride in her voice; she could, like the rich, spend money, when it was needed for her child. This gave her a curious sense of pleasure.

Miran's words had provided the comfort she had been seeking. Miran was right. If Shah's medicines worked what did it matter whether he was or was not a good man?

After Miran left, Asma laid her hand on the child's forehead. It was still hot to touch. She bent down and kissed the burning forehead and whispered, "Look what I have brought for you—milk and a melon. Will my doll drink some hot milk? The hot milk and Doctor sahib's medicine will make her fever go away." The child moved her eyes from the ceiling and fixed them upon her mother but said nothing. Asma took her silence for consent since the child never said much. She went and heated the milk in a small aluminum pot that had turned a permanent brown-black from the smoke of the stove.

She returned to the bed with the hot milk in a glass and a spoon. She fed the child slowly, spoon by spoon until the glass was emptied. Then she opened the bottle of medicine and, pouring out a spoonful of the pink mixture, uttered a silent prayer: "Oh God, have mercy on my child."

The medicine made the child drowsy and soon she drifted into a peaceful sleep. Asma watched her for a while and then got up and walked over to the corner of the room that served as the kitchen. This is where the stove was. On the wall behind the stove hung on nails a few blackened pots and two ladles. What was she to cook for her husband's dinner? There was only flour in the house, no meat and no vegetables. She had spent all the money she had been given. She braced herself to face his anger when he returned after work. She dragged the Nido tin towards her, and taking out flour from it, sat down to knead the dough for rotis. Her face assumed the compressed, impenetrable expression she usually wore when her husband would get mad at her. "Let him be angry. If this girl had been a son, he would have been different. Everything would have been different." Wiping the sweat from her brow, she started rolling out the rotis.

It must have been five or six in the afternoon when her husband returned. A strong sweaty odor entered the hut with him. He wiped his face with a scarf and hung it up on the clothesline that stretched between the two walls.

"How is she?" he asked, glancing briefly at the bed.

"Not much better."

"Do you have my food ready? I am very hungry. You didn't give me any rotis to take with me this morning either. So hurry up now."

It was true she had been so busy with Guddi when he left for work, she had had no time to make his lunch. "Oh, but he can see, it was because I was so worried about her, can't he? Why doesn't he go to her bed and see how she is? He asks me 'how is she', as if she were some stranger come to live in our house."

He sat down beside her on the floor, next to the stove. She slid towards him a plate of rotis and another containing some sliced onions.

"What's this?" he asked staring at the plates. Asma kept her eyes low and stared at her toes; her shoulders were hunched and her face wore a tight expression. But in her heart she felt ready to face his wrath.

"I said, is this all you have for me to eat? What did you do with the money I gave you this morning?" he asked in a shrill voice.

Asma continued to stare at her toes.

"Answer me woman! What did you do with the money?"

She looked up from her toes and turning her face towards the bed she

said, softly, struggling to push back her habitual fear of him, "I went to the doctor for her."

"And paid him twenty-five rupees?" his voice was incredulous.

"Twenty," she corrected him, "and I bought some fruit and milk. The doctor said she needed that too."

"Yeah, what else did the doctor say? Didn't he give you a hundred rupee note to buy the stuff too?"

Asma did not answer him. She knew from having lived with him for four years that his anger would soon settle into a morose silence. He did not beat her up when he was angry like the other husbands in the colony. A few taunting remarks at her was as far as he went. Sometimes she wished he would beat her up. Then she could cry her heart out to the other women and be supported by their sympathy. Most of them thought Asma's husband was a strange man because he never raised his hands at her. She felt herself excluded from the mutual commiseration they had to offer each other. It was almost as if he didn't think of her as his wife.

He did not beat her. And yet, she was afraid of him. She felt she would fear him less if he gave her a good thrashing once in a while. She could have taken his beatings better than his stinging words and his bitter silence. She could not get accustomed to this coldness. Even Miran's husband beat her. And she was always boasting how much he loved Miran. Miran's screams were heard by Asma with something akin to envy. The next day Miran would come to show her wounds to Asma.

"He's a harami. Look," she would say, holding up her bruised wrist, "he twisted my wrist so bad. Broke all my bangles."

"But these—?"

"Oh these. These are new. He bought them for me today." Miran would jingle her new glass bangles.

Asma had gone through countless such scenes with Miran. And each time she wished something so romantic might happen to her someday.

"Men must beat their women. It makes them feel good," Miran said. She said it made them love their wives better afterwards.

Despite his cold treatment of her, Asma felt sorry for her husband at times. She knew he worked hard but jobs were hard to find in the city and never paid well, well enough to survive in the city. And she herself could not even give him a son to make him happy. People in her village had told her father there was money to be made in the cities. She had never forgotten the time when her family had had to leave the village. There had been a drought for several seasons, her father's fields had yielded no crops, the debts with the landlord had mounted, and at last, her father's decision to leave the village had come. Asma was a mere child then, per-

haps ten or eleven. She remembered her last meeting with the other girls by the village well. They had cried and hugged each other. That was eight years ago.

Her father had found a job as a gardener in the city, and placed Asma as a maid in a large bungalow. There she had worked for four years until one day her father came to get her. He said she was to get married. Her husband was a good man, he said. He had a job and was from a good family. His aunt had been a neighbor of theirs in the village. She felt sad leaving the bungalow. She had had an easy life there: there had been plenty of food, her work was light (she mostly had to watch over the two younger children) and in the afternoons, when "Baji" came home from school, Asma and she played with Baji's dolls.

Her father had said, with pride in his voice that there would be no need for her to be a maid anymore. Her husband would provide for her. The first few months with a strange new man had dampened the excitement she had felt dressed up as a bride. The wedding had been fun. Married life didn't seem like so much fun. And then the pregnancy which had descended upon her like a force unknown. The birth of her child: "a girl," the midwife had pronounced to the husband waiting outside the hut, in quiet voice, sounding apologetic she couldn't give him better news. Asma had stared at the brown and red, quivering, mass of life that had just emerged from her and cried, filled with pity and guilt, she knew not why.

Her husband was saying something. She was brought back to the world in a rude instant. He was leaving, "going to the pan shop" was what she heard before he stepped out. "He can't forget the pan shop for one day. If Guddi and I were both to die, he'd still go to the pan shop," Asma mused. The pan shop was her husband's favorite haunt. He gathered with other men at that spot every evening. There they sat on benches and smoked bidis, chewed pan, and exchanged gossip; Hamid, the owner, added to the jovialty by playing lewd Indian film songs on his taperecorder.

She looked at his plate: he had emptied it. She then started to eat herself, breaking pieces from a roti automatically. After she finished she went back to sit beside the bed. It was a long time before her husband returned and as soon as his bed was made ready he had laid down and gone to sleep.

****

The circle of yellow light around the lantern had grown smaller. Oil was running out and the wick, blackened at its tip, had burned down to half its

size. Asma's head lay drooping on her arm on the side of the bed. Sleep had overcome her at last after nights of wakefulness. Even her thoughts that had managed to keep her awake had fled from her tired brain. Suddenly her head jerked up. A loud noise had awakened her. She felt like she had been slapped on her ear. She rubbed her ears with the arm that had become numb with the weight of her head and gazed at the lantern. Slowly she turned her head to the left where her husband slept. A muffled voice spoke from under the sheet. "Never let a man sleep in peace." Her husband was rubbing his arm and addressing the mosquitoes. A movement later his two hands jumped up and clapped in the air: he was trying to capture a mosquito. "So it was you," Asma thought realizing where the noise had come from. She almost laughed at his helplessness. She could not see his face. He lay covered like a corpse in a shroud under the sheet. "Why don't you go and bite her," she heard him mutter before he drifted back into sleep. "What sort of blood must I have," she thought, "if even the mosquitoes keep away from me?"

She couldn't tell how long she had been asleep. Through the cracks in the door thin silvery streaks of light were beginning to creep in. "Almost morning," Asma murmured, wondering what this new day had in store for her that might be different from the past three or four days she had spent in such desperation. She lifted the glass dome of the lantern and extinguished the dying flame. She then went to the bed, and in the greyish light that was beginning to fill the room, bent down and laid a hand on the child's forehead. She pulled back her hand immediately in horror as if she had been stung. The icy coldness of her child's head still ran through her fingers. She bent down further and peered into the child's face. She held her breath: a deathly pallor, blue and gray, and utterly unrecognizable, was all she could see in the child's face. Asma tried to listen for her breathing but she could barely tell if the child was alive or dead. "Oh God, have mercy," she cried as she threw the quilt aside and shook the child, "Guddi, wake up! I say, wake up, speak to me, oh,—oh God." The child's eyes remained closed and her head lolled on the pillow from side to side as Asma tried to shake her awake.

She felt herself choke with fear. She rushed to her husband who was still asleep in the midst of Asma's crying. "Wake up, oh, wake up! I think Guddi is dead!" She was crying uncontrollably now.

Her husband threw the sheet aside and sat up. "What? Who's dying? What's happening?" Asma did not wait to explain. She ran back to the bed. Her husband approached the bed rubbing his eyes.

"Guddi," he called out to his daughter.

"You see, she doesn't wake up. She won't say anything. Dead, dead! My girl was dying while I slept. Oh God, oh God!" Asma was sobbing un-

controllably and with her hands she beat her chest as if to still the pain of her breaking heart.

The father of the girl kneeled down beside the bed and placed his ear on her chest. He listened for a moment before he spoke. "She's not dead."

"Not dead?" Asma stared at him in disbelief. "But why won't she wake up, or speak. Look at her lips, they're blue. She's dead."

"I tell you she's not. Pray to God for her. Cover her with another blanket. Rub her hands and feet—" and here he stopped as if he had run out of more suggestions and stood uncertainly by the bedside.

"No, no! This won't do anymore. We have to take her to a real doctor. Now! Do you hear, a real doctor in the Civic Hospital," she echoed the words of the fruit seller. "Go, go get a taxi while I get her ready. Go!" she was shouting now, her words coming in breathless torrents in between her sobs.

"But you are mad, Asma. I have no money. How will I pay the doctor?"

"Oh God I don't know. But listen, it doesn't matter. We'll pay the doctor. Somehow. Later, later. But go now. I can't let her die. I can't let her die," she said, her voice drowning in her sobs.

"Asma, how are we going to pay him? Why don't you think? I don't even have enough money for the taxi. I don't think we can even get a taxi at this hour."

She looked up in his face for a moment. He seemed taken aback by the urgency in her voice. "He's wondering how I can speak to him like this. I, who have never raised my voice to him before. I don't know how myself."

"How? You ask how this? How that? Who cares how? I'll find a way. But you must go now." She turned him towards the door and almost pushed him out. He barely had enough time to grab his slippers.

Then she ran back to the child and started wrapping up the cold little wasted body in the quilt with shaky hands. "You cannot die. Do you hear? After all I have—suffered. You cannot—. I won't let you—" she could no longer bear to say the word "die." She started to slip on socks onto the little feet and rubbing them with her hands in a desperate effort to bring warmth to the cold body. The thought crossed her mind once more: "She's dead." Shuddering, she got up and pulled her chadar from the clothesline and wrapping it around herself she sat down at the edge of the bed to wait for the taxi. She sat with her back to Guddi. She could not bring herself to look at her any more.

But she could not sit still for long. Time had never seemed so infinitely slow to her before. She could think of nothing except her fear that the child was already dead, or would die before she could get her to the hos-

pital. She remembered how pale and deathly her thin face had appeared in the greyish light of dawn. She could not at this moment feel any love, pity or pain for the suffering child. All she wanted now was not to lose her. She could not bring herself to look at the child. She could not bear it if she turned around and found that she was really dead. She was Asma's "guddi", her doll, her only real possession in life, something she could truly call her own, and it was about to be lost. She was being robbed by fate once again.

She could not let it happen. Not again. It had happened so many times. No, she was not going to let it happen this time. She had never cried out in protest when they had taken her away from her village, her only true home. And then memsahib's home out of which she had tried to make her world. But fate had taken away that too. And now this life, which had been made whole by her "guddi's" presence was about to be shattered into nothingness. "I must, I must do something. What? How? How?" She covered her face with both hands and wept. Without turning to look at Guddi, she begged her: "Oh Guddi, don't leave me. You are all I have. Don't, my doll, don't leave your mother alone in this world."

Wiping her face with the chadar, she got up and started up and down the room's length in agitation, all the while muttering to herself, "What now? What now? I must find a way." She felt something under her foot and bent down absently to pick it up. It was the old doll Guddi used to sit with holding in her lap. Asma had given it to her. It used to be Asma's own doll. She had won it at the fair where she had once gone with the memsahib's children. Baji had taken it away from her although she had made it seem like she was just putting it in her toy cupboard so that the doll's beautiful red dress would not get dirty. Asma used to long to hold it and feel the soft silk of its dress, but she could not get the doll out of the cupboard until Baji came home from school. After a while she just accepted it as Baji's doll which she was only allowed to play with under Baji's watchful eye. She had cried for it when her father had come to get her. But Baji had refused to give it back. Two years later when she had taken her daughter to visit memsahib, she had asked if she could have the doll then, for her daughter. Baji by that time had grown tired of dolls and could not even remember what she had done with Asma's doll. With the help of the new maid of the house, Asma had found the doll abandoned in a box, buried under other old toys in the storage room. She was a sorry sight by then, her beautiful long hair all but gone, her silken red bridal gown in tatters. Asma had picked up the doll, shocked at its condition but glad that at last it was hers, and taking it to her daughter she had said, "Guddi, look here is another guddi for you to play with."

She now held up the doll till its glassy blue eyes were at a level with her

own swollen red ones. "I cannot let it happen. You see, I can't, not again. I had left you with Baji. See what she did to you? You poor thing, you poor thing." She hugged the doll to her chest as she continued to pace up and down.

Her husband entered at that moment. He appeared small and insignificant to her, before her own grandiose scheme of saving the child, of averting what fate may have in store for her.

"The taxi is here. He could not make it up the lane. It's too narrow. You'll have to walk. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"I still don't know how we are going to pay for it all," he muttered.

"You don't have to. I do."

There was a strange and cold sharpness in her voice as if finally the courage that had been denied her all her life had been granted her in the most painful moments of her life. No problem appeared insoluble to her at that moment. If there was a solution she would find it. She put down the doll and picking up the cold, lifeless weight of the child in her arms headed for the door.

Andy Quan

On Boxing Day

I.

As always, we ran to the children's section,
across the oriental bridge
with its sculpted water,
to the giant willows
like whispers from the corner of the mouth.
There was never enough snow to obscure
the tightly spaced markers,
not that I could remember.
"Look," I said. "This one lived for three days only."

(I imagined cremation
a giant inferno, flames and a man who would
carefully sift the ashes
to a porcelain jar.)

II.

Gung-gung (father of my father)
I did not know you and
you only me for the month
you moved towards your death
and I from my birth.
We spoke little English and
I too young to find warmth
in our common language of blood.

Po-po (mother of my father)
Your mouth is closed, a solemn line
on the photo, black and white,
unclear wrinkles. This is how
I imagine you: silent, devoted.

Aunty Jean (father's dead sister)
I have stared for hours
at the bottle collection
from your stewardess days,
at the spoons, at the one
with the tiny Dutch windmill
turning silver long after your passing.

III.

child's play—
JON KEN PO!
adrenalin rush
and go again.
life reduced to
(three simple options:
rock paper scissors

Now, they've added dynamite
a touch of modern violence
but we made do with basics

we counted this way too.
In front of gravesites
each year, on boxing day
one word, one bow
JON KEN PO
JON KEN PO
JON KEN PO.

lately at Vancouver funerals

Cousin Nona
left her dead husband's gravesite
went home to grieve
so the casket could be lowered
and buried in the earth

her nephew, the med student
later found the corpse in the
basement of the research centre
no coffin in sight

I imagine there was hell to pay
and additional suffering—

that is why we are standing here
as the bulldozer and workmen
in sloppy clothes
pull the blanket of dirt over
the rectangular hole in the ground

it is done coarsely and
defies metaphor
huge metal noises
and abrupt shovelling motions

I say —this is a crass tradition—
—it is not a tradition— they say
—it is something new.
Look at what happened
to cousin Nona.—

Chinatown Window Family

Blackened skewers, hook and bars
align to fill space

Display the happy window family:

The chicken: wings and legs equally
stretched down head twisted with eyes
forced up to look for salvation

The duck: eyes baked into skull
drop of oil hovering from crisped bill

The pig: shrunken stare that cannot envision
its disembodied and multiplied body parts
lined up and separated like pop art

Also, its cross-section: thick
layer of fat beneath pockmarked
rind. Tight, lucent, pearly white

The woman who splits this
kinship apart cackles:
"one chicken and one duck please"

She pays off the keeper with
chopping knife and blood apron

Pushing tiny folds of steam
on glass door, she steps to the night

Blood under skin rolls
to a perfect momentary stop.

Evening in Paris

Danuta Gleed

Mother is tired of her blue dress and has taken the scissors to it, snipped off the sleeves and the collar, unpicked the stitches on the hem. The bedroom floor is a field of scraps of pale blue flowers with small black dots in the middle. Mother sits by the creaky sewing machine: she places her left hand flat on the dress to hold it steady, her right hand guides it through. She lowers her head as the pedal rises and falls faster and faster beneath her foot. The needle clatters, stabs the fabric so quickly I can't see it moving.

I have to lie in bed while I'm convalescing or, at least, on the bed. I had malaria soon after Christmas and the day I came back from hospital to my house in the Polish settlement on the edge of Nairobi, my friend Teresa rushed over with her scrap book of bubble gum cards and said I could keep it for a day if I was very careful. She had acquired two new cards while I was away: a Lauren Bacall which I already have and a Clark Gable which I'd like to have.

There was an orange cat hanging about on the verandah when I arrived and I asked my mother if I could bring her inside with me. Mother nodded yes but added that I musn't feed her. I climbed into bed with the cat and my old doll and mother pulled the covers around me and took my face in her hands.

"Too pale," she said. My father was standing in the doorway. She glanced at him. "Too thin. Don't you think?"

My father smiled at me, winked. I smiled back.

I pick up the biggest scraps of fabric from the floor and hold them against my doll. The blue flowers with their dark centres match the doll's eyes and I ask my mother if she'll make her a dress or a skirt. Later, she says. Later. She has moved away from the sewing machine and is standing on the other side of the room: she faces the small, square mirror on the wall above the dresser, smears her lips with lipstick. Her lips turn scarlet, fiery against her pale skin. She removes the gold top from the bottle of *Evening in Paris*, dabs it on the insides of her wrists, behind her

ears, in the shadowy space between her breasts. The too-sweet scent of the perfume fills the room and she stands motionless for a moment, her dark eyes staring out from the glass as if she has forgotten where she is and what she is supposed to be doing, as if she has gone somewhere else. She is lit up by the sun that presses in through the window, sharp around the edges like the cardboard cut-out dolls I play with. Threads of dust dance past me as I lie on the bed beneath the mosquito net that hangs in a knot from the ceiling. The stillness is heavy, oppressive: my foot thwacks the knot and it swings back and forth, creaking.

"Stop it, Dana. You'll make it fall."

Mother smooths her hair, winds dark tendrils around her fingers. I kick the knot again.

"Stop it," she says once more.

She keeps her eyes fixed on the mirror while she admonishes me, as if I were in there somewhere, a figure diminished, viewed through the wrong end of a telescope. She shifts from one foot to another, inspects the flat mole on her left cheek, touches it lightly with her forefinger. She props her elbow on the dresser and twirls her soft, dark pencil over the mole until it is black, as black as the heart of a blue flower on her dress.

"My beauty spot." She turns towards me, still holding the pencil in her hand, smiling.

*

My father gave mother the bottle of *Evening in Paris* before I was admitted to hospital. When I saw him pull the blue box from his jacket pocket, I knew he'd decided not to accept the job in Cape Town although mother had said that if we went to live there we could afford to buy a proper house with a swimming pool and even hire a houseboy to do the cooking and cleaning. My father wanted to wait until things were settled in Poland so that we could go with him to his home in Warsaw, to live in the house that had belonged to his parents before the war. The country was different, shattered, but living there would be better than being blown about the place the way they had been since the war began. The ownership papers to the Warsaw property were locked in a tin box in the bedroom closet. He'd snatched them from his house the day his family left and had kept them in his shoes through the trek across Russia, across Persia, to the coast that brought him to Africa.

Mother opened the perfume box without speaking and left the bottle on the dresser, beside the creased photograph of herself and my father standing together on the steps of a small, white church the day they were married, the same year the war ended.

*

"That cat seems very fat for a stray." Mother frowns into the mirror.

She flicks on the light, draws the curtains on the blackening sky. I pick up the cat and hold her in my arms. I have decided to call her *Smutna*—sad—because she makes small, piteous sounds even when her eyes are closed and she seems to be asleep. Her fur is thicker, softer now than when I first found her, her stomach round from the scraps I leave for her under the verandah steps. I turn my back on mother and carry Smutna out onto the verandah where my father is sitting with a bottle on the table beside him and a glass in his hand.

"You're sure you won't come with us?" Mother calls to him through the open door.

He raises his glass to his lips and shakes his head.

Teresa's Uncle Tadeusz has driven in from Nairobi in his new car and has offered to take Teresa's parents and mine into the city for the evening for dinner and, later, a film. Go with them, my father said to my mother. He said he would stay home to look after me.

Mother's heels click across the verandah and she disappears into the darkness. I hear voices, laughter, the sound of a car starting, pulling away. I lower myself on the verandah steps and arrange Smutna on my lap. I glance at my father, hidden in the shadows.

Sometimes he rises from the verandah chair at nine o'clock and goes into the living room to listen to the news on the BBC. The living room is furnished with three hard chairs, a table covered with a white cloth embroidered with pink roses, an upturned wooden crate with the radio on top. We eat our meals on the verandah or at the corner table in the kitchen and the only time I go into the living room is when my father asks me to.

Dana, he started to beg last year when I began to go to school and my English became better than his, come into the living room. Sit with me. Listen to the news. Tell me if I miss something important. *Important* is any mention of Poland, any information about what is happening there. I know that Stalin is an old man and won't last forever: I know that when he dies my father will take us home to the grey brick house that belongs to his family. My father is certain that the house is still there, as certain as he is that his young sister is still alive and is looking for him the way he is looking for her. He writes to the Red Cross four times a year and he knows that they'll find her eventually. She was seven years old the last time he saw her, in 1939, when the Germans began bombing Warsaw. She is twenty-one now, a young woman. My father named me after her.

He tells me this the evenings he looks out over the verandah railing

into the darkness: he inspects the moon, a piece of bone in the sky. He places his glass on the table, pulls me towards him, holds my lank, pale hair between his fingers. I look back at him, not speaking. The smell that clings to him is sour, ugly.

"Dana?" He shakes his head. I hold my breath. "You don't look like her," he says.

*

Teresa wants her scrap book back. She has perched on the end of my bed and I look to see if she's in a good mood. If she is, she'll agree to swap cards with me: I might even get the Clark Gable from her if I offer her something she really wants. Sometimes when we've swapped she changes her mind later and we have to swap back, but even then she never allows me to be a queen when we play castles. And even when she says I can be a princess instead of a servant, she insists that Edward must be my prince.

Teresa never chooses Edward for her king. She always chooses Marek because he is tall and because the others listen to him when he speaks. The girls giggle at Edward and the boys shove him and smirk at him. Edward's hair is the same colour as the red dusty earth in our settlement and his mother makes him wear clothes that are too big for him and had probably belonged to his father who died when Edward was a baby. Once, Edward had come out of his house with a bobby pin holding back his damp curls and we'd shrieked and screamed at him so hard that he'd turned away and ran back home.

Teresa wraps both hands around her scrap book and slides from the bed.

"I have more cards than you," I tell her.

She tightens her lips.

"I'll swap you," I say.

My father buys the bubble gum for me whenever he is in Nairobi. He extracts the flat, sweet-smelling packets from his shirt pocket when he gets home, holds them up between two fingers, smiling, pretending that he doesn't kow how they got there. Teresa's parents always forget to buy gum for her, even when she asks, but sometimes her Uncle Tadeusz brings a packet or two when he remembers. Usually, however, he appears with small boxes of jewellery or parcels of fabric or ribbons for the girls' hair. He's given Teresa a silver charm bracelet with a rickshaw dangling from it, a tiger, a parasol and even a small rose with tiny, thin petals folded over one another so tightly you can't see inside. He has given

Teresa's mother an ivory necklace and bracelet which she wears to church on Sundays: the beads are yellowed, the shape of birds' eggs.

Teresa says that her uncle escaped from Poland during the war with money and gold and is keeping it to take with him when he gets permission to live in England. He has already applied and has been for a medical: he was refused because his right leg is shorter than his left and he walks with a limp unless he wears his special shoes. He is going to apply again and if he is refused this time he will try America or Canada. Some country will have to take him, because he is rich. Teresa's family are hoping to go to England. Teresa's father was a dentist in Poland: now he is studying English so that he can take the English exams.

Teresa is standing with her hand on the doorknob and I wonder if she'll stay a little longer if I tell her about my secret cards, the ones in the tattered chocolate box beneath my bed. These are duplicates of the ones in the scrap book or single ones that I don't want to show to anyone, for reasons I do not understand. I take them out when I'm alone, pair the men with the women and lay them out two by two. Teresa's favourite man is Robert Mitchum. She has one card of him: I have two, exactly the same. I keep one in the scrap book, one in the chocolate box. His face is dark beneath a wide-brimmed hat and his collar is turned up around his neck as if he is trying to hide. I keep him away from my Ava Gardner with her stiff pink lace wrapped around her bare shoulders and her cool marble face. Although she isn't smiling, she is the most beautiful woman I own. She reminds me of my mother.

Kasia pushes the door open as Teresa is about to leave and spreads herself over my parents' bed. She raises one leg slowly, turns it this way and that, inspects it carefully, lowers it again. She yawns, fans her dark hair over the covers. Kasia is fourteen, more than twice as old as Teresa and I.

Last year she appeared in the room while Teresa and I were playing with our cut-out dolls: she placed one finger briefly over her lips and pulled up her shirt to show us her new breasts. They were small, tight mounds, not like my mother's breasts which shifted beneath her clothes every time she moved. I saw my father come up behind her in the kitchen one day as she raised her arms to reach for flour on the top shelf: his fingers brushed the buttons on her blouse but she turned quickly and stepped aside, her lips thin, her eyes bright in her flushed face.

"I have a secret," Kasia says. She arches her back. Her breasts are bigger now, rise sharply.

Teresa stares at her. "I know all about it. Dad's going to be mad when he finds out."

"I don't care. He's given me a dress, one of his mother's. A proper dress from a shop. It's yellow silk with lots of pearl buttons. His mother will never miss it, he says. She's got *thousands*."

"Dad'll kill you. You know what they say about the English boys."

"What?" I sit up straight. "What?"

"Shut up." Teresa holds the door open and glances over her shoulder. "You don't know anything."

*

"What *do* they say about English boys?" I ask my father one evening.

My father places his glasses on the verandah table and peers at me. In the fading light he seems to be reading, moving backwards underwater. "Who've you been talking to?" he asks.

"Nobody. I just want to know, that's all."

"Well, they're different."

"How?"

He waves his hand in the air. "They have everything. Money. A home." He pauses. "Everything."

I sit down on the verandah steps and stare into the blackness. The bottle, my father's glass clink behind me and then I hear only the night noises, the wind sifting through the long grasses and leaves, the screech of a hyaena in the distance. A round, transparent moon slides out from behind a cloud that has strung itself out like a veil. Moonlight touches the flat, pebbly ground, the low, squat trees, the square houses with their doors and windows closed, muffled. My father once said that he's afraid only of things he cannot see. I shiver, strain to see harder through the shadows, through dark shapes that cluster around and make no sense.

Mother is going out again with Teresa's parents and Tadeusz. They are going dancing, she told me as she put on the new red dress she finished making this afternoon. She turned quickly, held up her hands while the dress skimmed and flared around her thighs. My father asked her where the fabric had come from.

"Tadeusz," she replied. She dabbed *Evening in Paris* in the space between her breasts and small, dark stains appeared on the fabric. She tipped the bottle over and shook it.

"Empty," she said and handed the bottle to me. "You want it, Dana?"

My father touched her elbow. "You shouldn't have taken the fabric," he hissed. "That man is dirt."

"At least he's alive," she replied so softly I hardly heard. She brushed past him and slipped through the door.

Mother's soft black pencil lay on the dresser when she'd gone, in a cir-

cle of white dust that had escaped from her box of powder. The lace-edged handkerchief that she'd pressed between her lips after she'd put on her lipstick had fallen to the floor. I picked it up, smoothed it over the dresser with the palm of my hand. I lifted it, held up two corners of lace as if I were holding a picture. I stared at the imprint of my mother's lips: a red, deformed heart.

*

Marek has devised a game from a film he saw about warriors who have to eat the flesh of victims they kill in order to become full members of their tribe. Marek holds up his thumb, slits the tip open with a small knife, presses a chunk of bread against the wound to soak up the blood. He swallows the bread and passes the knife to the boy beside him. One by one, each boy has to do the same. The girls watch. Edward throws up as soon as blood begins to spurt from his thumb, before Marek hands him the bread. He runs home while everyone screams at him. Teresa says that he's gone and spoilt everything and now we can't play. She keeps looking at me as if it's my fault.

I want to say that I'll do it instead: I shall cut myself, swallow my own blood. The knife is sharp, quick. It won't hurt at all. Whenever I fall and graze my knees, the beads of blood that squeeze through the slashed skin shine dark and thick, like jewels. I am not afraid. I look at Marek: I'm about to ask him for the knife but Teresa is watching me and as soon as I open my mouth to speak she starts shouting, "We're playing something else, right now. Right now."

I walk away and sit on our verandah steps with my elbows on my knees. Mother emerges from the kitchen with a towel draped over one shoulder and a large white bowl in her hands. She sinks to the ground beside me, peers beneath the steps, reaches in, scoops up a kitten, then another and another. She drops them in the bowl. Two of them are white, one black, two more are orange, like Smutna. Their eyes are shut and they are writhing, pushing one another with their noses as if they are trying to find somewhere to hide. I lean over to stroke them but mother removes the towel, stretches it over the bowl and holds it tightly against the rim as she rises.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"We're going to be overrun with cats," she says as she walks away. "She'll be better off without them."

I squat on the ground, stick my head beneath the house. I think I can hear faint crying but although I keep looking I see nothing.

*

Tadeusz stops to talk to my parents after church and offers to take me to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Teresa's parents took her to see it the other day and she's been talking about it ever since. I want to go but my father hesitates. I shift from foot to foot, squint into the sun, waiting.

"You'd better go with her." My father nods curtly to my mother, then he's gone, a silhouette in the sun, rigid, marching towards the bus stop.

Tadeusz buys me an ice cream in the theatre. I don't really want it and it melts and drips over my knees, making them sticky. I begin to cry as soon as Snow White leans over the wishing well and sees her reflection in the water, and I can't stop. The lights go on when the film ends and I turn away so that my mother and Tadeusz can't see my red eyes, but they notice anyway. They laugh, tell me not to be silly. The film ended happily, didn't it?

Tadeusz takes us to a restaurant before we go home and I drink Coca-Cola from a bottle made of thick glass, tinted green. Bubbles rush up my nose and make my eyes water. My stomach starts to ache. I look at my mother but she is speaking to Tadeusz and her face is turned away from mine. My stomach flips. I slide from the chair and rush through the swinging doors to the toilet and throw up. I lower the toilet seat and sit on it. I think of mother rising from the table, looking around the restaurant for me. She will bend over me, take my hot face in her cool, smooth hands. She will stare at me as if she can see me, as if I am really here, and she'll say that I am too pale, sick. I sit for a long time, staring at the scratched, peeling paint on the grey walls and ceiling, at the metal door, the bent nail on the broken lock, its tip sticking out. I sit until my limbs are heavy, dull, then I jump up and slam the palm of my hand hard against the nail. I stare at the puncture in my skin, a pink dot, at the stunned patch of white around it. The dot suddenly gushes red. I return to the restaurant with toilet paper wrapped around my hand, red bleeding through.

"For heaven's sake, Dana. How did you do that?"

"A nail." I look down at my feet. Tadeusz takes my hand, wraps it in a handkerchief he has pulled from his pocket, secures it with a knot.

I stare out of the window on the way home, at the sun that has turned into a spinning orange and is dropping towards the horizon. I can see my pale thin hair tangled in the breeze, flickering in the glass as we drive. I am thinking of Snow White, of her dark, smooth hair, her pale skin and deep red lips reflected in the water of the wishing well and of how the prince fell in love with her the moment he saw her, even before he knew her.

*

Teresa's father has been offered a job in England and they're planning to leave soon. We'll see spring in England, Teresa keeps saying. I watch low clouds assembling in the sky. The rains are late this year: the air grows heavy, thick. Tadeusz hasn't been accepted anywhere yet but Teresa's family will sponsor him as soon as they're settled.

Kasia brings me a yellow silk dress and says I can cut it up to make clothes for my doll. I pick it up when she leaves, hold it against the window. The row of white buttons are as hard as bone and the dress smells of flowers, of powder, of something elusive, thin as the scent in the empty perfume bottle my mother gave me. I filled it up with water the other day, dabbed the liquid on my wrists, behind my ears, the way I had seen mother do. I closed my eyes but the scent lingered for only a moment, drifted, shrivelled in the air.

*

"We're going to a film," mother calls from the bedroom. "Come with us," she says into the mirror.

Teresa's parents say they're too busy to go out in the evenings now so mother has been going out alone with Tadeusz.

"You go," father replies. There is a long pause before he adds, "Have a good time."

Sometimes, when she leaves, he tells me stories of winter in Poland, of snow and ice so cold it feels like fire when you touch it. I see long white fields as I sit on the verandah steps, frost shimmering on moonlit fields. He tells me about his little sister, Dana, who filled his shoes with pebbles when he was rushing to school in the mornings and of how she made him laugh when he was angry. Their parents were killed on a Warsaw street the day the bombs began to fall: he lost Dana in the panicked crowds.

He won't speak at all tonight, even when I touch his arm, so I go into the living room alone at nine o'clock, twist the knob on the radio until the crackling and wheezing fades and I can hear the deep voice I am searching for. I sit down on the hard floor and wrap my arms around my knees. I stare above the radio, at the shadows on the wall, and I see the war, a vague, amorphous shape, a cloud that has done its damage on the landscape and has drifted away, has turned into a mist dissolving on the horizon.

I am sleepy as I listen: my bony knees are pulled up, dug into my chin. My back is beginning to ache and it is all I'm thinking of when the voice announces that Stalin has died. He lingered for several days after his

stroke and now he is dead. I do not know what a stroke is, but I imagine it as a slap or a blow or lightning that zig-zags through the sky towards its target. Josef Stalin is dead: the words are repeated in the same monotone and I am not sure for a moment if they are the same ones I am hearing. *Josef.* It never occurred to me that he had a first name: my father never mentioned it. Was this Josef Stalin tall or short, fair or dark? Did I ever see pictures of him in the newspapers? Has my father ever described this man who had held so much in his hands? I can't remember: I close my eyes and press them hard against my knees. Oranges and reds explode, shatter.

The rain has begun and when I step out on the verandah the sour-sweet smell of damp earth fills the air.

"Stalin is dead. Stalin is dead." I shake my father's arm, tug his hand. His fingers are cold: the air is chilly and the raindrops fall harder, rattle over the roof like pellets.

My father raises his hands, drops them on his lap. "I'm tired," he whispers.

He falls asleep in the chair, his head flung back and I fetch a blanket from the bedroom and cover him from his neck down to his feet. A wet Smutna jumps onto the verandah and rubs herself against my leg. I pick her up, carry her into the bedroom. I sit down on the bed beside my doll. Smutna digs her claws into my arms and makes small, motor noises into my neck as if she's forgotten about her kittens, about the way she cried in the darkness beneath the house.

Her orange hair seems exactly the same colour as Edward's in this dull light. Edward picked her up this afternoon when I was sitting outside with her. He held her on his shoulder and we laughed because his hair was a shade redder than Smutna's, darker, but if I saw it from a distance I would not know the difference.

Teresa heard us laughing and came out to give me her scrap book because she was packing for her trip to England and was supposed to take only the things that were absolutely necessary. She stared at Edward, at Smutna, but said nothing. I put her scrap book aside without checking to see if the Clark Gable was still there.

I remove a blanket from my doll, wrap it around Smutna and place her on my pillow. I sit down on the floor, reach under the bed and pull out my scrap book, the chocolate box and pieces of fabric spattered with blue flowers. I crumple the fabric and hurl it into the garbage container. I open the scrap book on Robert Mitchum's page: I remove Ava Gardner from the chocolate box and place her beside him. They look fine together. I can't figure out why I never thought of this before.

Jim Nason

AIDS

He force feeds himself.
Tomato soup and day old bread. (counting pennies)
That's it. Student's income
severe depression.
His boney shoulders
rounded, (When did this happen?)
stomach white and flabby. He's ripped
the shit out of his bloody nails.
(infected mess)
In the kitchen,
cans left lined up
on the sickly grey
counter Sometimes for days
Days on end

CAMPBELLS CAMPBELLS

CAMPBELLS CAMPBELLS

(He's no Warhol.)

Montreal

Each humid night before bed
we three place an open plastic
bag half emptied of 'blanched' nuts
inside the sweating
kitchen cupboard—the one
over the sink—the one
with the slanted sticking yellow door.
The cock roaches crawl in and are trapped there—racing
over each other's hard gold
or brown salted skins, trying
to inch up and over the oily
sides of the bag but sliding back
against one another
furious and fast.

In the first soft strip
of the early morning light
Bobby pours them onto
the already hot cement
across from the 'Club A Go Go'. He smiles
and nods while the prostitute, high
defeated and pale
in a red vinyl micro mini skirt
there already (or still) says, "bonjour monsieur,
c'est terrible n'est ce pas, les bebites?"
. . . and they are gone too quickly
into the cracks and the light.

Later, Dorothy and I are on a mission
to find a Kosher bird
and a bottle of French Red
while the bread we've made lined up
—five metal tins
draped white in tea towels
rising sweet and warm comforts
Bobby, who alone in his sunny studio
builds his last
guitars and listens
to Kate and Anna McGarrigle as they
sing 'Blanche Comme La Neige' on the radio.

After dinner when the sun is setting and
the sky is viscous blue behind the decay
and shadows of tumbling black brick and
pink and white neon, we three walk
on the decent cool mountain.
The dinner dishes piled high
in the cracked skin of porcelain: chicken bones,
half a boiled potato
and a drop of red
in the bottom
of a gleaming wine
glass where we've come to see
one august roach has lived
a more pleasant farewell
than most.

. . . and Bobby is gracious
    enough to dispose of the trouble
    in the vin rouge
and he sings us all to a restful sleep
on this close summer night
before securing the sticking yellow door
against the cool fire of the red ripping light
and the noisy concerns of the many Montreal lives
as the music from one radio floats up blind
from the partially open window
of the circling black car
cruising indifferent and never does stop
for the angel white face
that stoops herself low
to speak a wee bit with life
where she finds it
there beneath her
high
heeled shoes and itching
hot feet.

Olive Oyl Drives Home

Michael Kenyon

Salad Days

After hospital, Blue Ragg comes to kill Popeye, comes twice to kill him. Both times they sit across the kitchen table, stiff and sober, toasting Blue's dead brother with a formal drink.

Take it easy, says Popeye. The way I figure it's like this. You got your sports events, and you got your pornography. You got your real life and your women. What I'm saying is you gotta know the difference. Know one thing from the other, see what I'm saying? There's what happened and there's the blame you want to pin on somebody. Listen, Blue, there's the real and the uncertain.

Yeah, Popeye, says Blue. Right. I'm hearing you. What the hell's sports got to do with anything?

Both times they part with a handshake, a real crusher, and Popeye's fear, guilt, and nervousness deepen. He envisions himself a sailor again, the runt hero ever at war with his best friend. He dreams of rescuing someone: he plucks the two brothers from the suspended car and hurls them to safety just before impact. Every day he will set something right. Perform some good deed. Work hard. When news of Blue Ragg's suicide reaches him, he panics, quits the area, moves to another plant in another city, but the line is run by kids and he can't keep up. He learns the streets and lands a job in the transport division, delivering parts. Every day driving he tries to make friends, tries to discover someone he can talk to. He meets only kids, and not one will ask him for a drink, let alone invite him home. He stops dreaming of helping people, dreams instead of the mothers of these children, thinks about them, imagines them everywhere. But this city is inhabited by children, every day younger and younger; it's a place of rinks and playgrounds, where TV stations transmit only cartoons. Toward dusk he may see the distant forms of men at crossroads, but he never sees women.

Somewhere families are eating family dinners.

Recording important games. Planning birthdays. Sealing cheques in envelopes.

Popeye shuts his eyes, rubs his forehead along the smooth curve of steering wheel. He remembers how on that night before the accident, a Saturday night, he and Blue climbed into the old white Olds, sat there a moment, waiting for Coy. How the car chugged and somewhere in the night there was music, a funny kind of music, kind of long-range missiles in the brain, heat-seeking.

Working late, he drives slowly past houses in residential districts, angling for a glimpse, but the light is wrong or curtains are drawn; the event he hopes to see already finished, or not yet begun.

His brakes squeal and he scans the sidewalk. He guesses the children can't see him. He adds years, making them older. He bestows a fuller cheek, softened skin, crowfeet, fallen arches. He gets acquainted with the kids and numbers them: each acquires so many years. Girl children grow hips, boys bellies.

Neighbourhoods change tone as these kids spontaneously age, waxing in a single moment from success to boredom to lethargy.

When he steps from his car, though, his mathematical city collides with other cities, and in the chaos he is lost. As he hurries home from work, jaywalking, his eyes weary from scanning, from fixing what won't be fixed, the roads blossom to each side. Trucks effloresce, decay. The men on corners threaten his very existence.

At night, after supper, he goes down and sits on a swing in the darkest part of the playground.

Time shapes the vessel, he whispers to the kids. You are the freight.

Unimpressed, they look out across the park: girls at boys, boys at girls.

Skateboard: video: the outside world.

In complete despair, he attempts subtraction. With some kids minus five puts them in the womb.

He sits on the swing, calming himself, the dead end of the pendulum, till he's alone, the city a ripple along the grass edge. He's suspended above a veldt, too green, nodding asleep, another endangered species. He stretches once and reaches through a series of empty moments for bed. He marches and the city gapes around him. There's an opening in the trashy wind, a 7-11 camera iris closing against fluorescent, the grey lobby of his building, his own finger poised above the elevator button, the tiny lens gazing from his door, the green digits of the clock radio. He drinks the Slurpee and brushes his hair. His mirrored face is ugly as sin

and has nothing to say, and he's artificial again, orbiting the bed, mumbling his prayers: God bless the sailors lost at sea. The sound that wakes him at almost dawn is not the phone, not the soundtrack, not his own snores, but another jangling: the outside going on in his absence. For light he switches on the shadow company; with the volume down, he watches creatures chasing the drawings they become.

The saddest days have the worst nights: every road is a solid steel tube, red or blue or orange, smooth and cool, stretching as far as the eye can see both directions. He's part of the surface and it runs him through. Lunch at the luncheonette, he tosses salt over his shoulder. The child waitresses all have hiccups. Every pie in the mirror cupboard says a different time. Later and later and later. At home he has a migraine and can't remember anything. When he tries the playground the grass looks lush and queasy; a breeze keeps him vaguely spinning like a pin on a thread; he's locked down debating the gender of the earth, while headlights like radioactivity jive the park boundaries.

He is sitting on his swing, hangdog, trying to come to a stop and watching light bounce off the tube, when a thin girl in green socks crosses in front. He closes his eyes.

The accident happened slow/quick. Hot bright still Sunday afternoon. That Saturday evening Popeye had steered the white car—slipping lanes, jumping lights—through that crazy music into careening traffic.

Lemme puke, man, said Coy. Slow down the car. Yeah. It's. Fuck. Ha!

We should've left him, said Popeye. I said we should've left him.

He's all right, said Blue, be OK now. Right bro?

Holy God. Holy God.

Lean out, for crying out loud! Shove his head out the Jesus window!

Hey, Popeye, don't push him. He's fine, fine. Keep driving.

Hey, assholes! said Coy. Gonna crawl up inside so deep, right up inside, huh? where it's black and wet and HOTDOG, man, HOTDOG! Right, boys?

Popeye can't fatten the next scenes, flat scenes. Bar scene, street scene, bar scene. They motored all night—yelling, because noise fueled the illusion of really impressive speed—past trees, dark intersections, jumbles of buildings, from dance hall to dance hall. He just wants to swing free, stop thinking about it, wants there to have been successful communication, to finally understand what happened. They'd found a dawn party still howling. On the grass behind the carport the brothers squirmed one at a time with a half-mad teenage girl, while upstairs Popeye located a son's room full of baseball gear. From the window, he watched the Ragg brothers. Then he watched satellites track the sky, till first light frisked

the brushcut lawns and robins revved up, till his eyes grew heavy and he fell, struck from the vertical, to sleep on the clean-made bed and dream of the assembly line: of an efficient woman worker in clean overalls.

Then, later that Sunday, Popeye and the brothers regrouped to cruise in sunshine three-quarters to next night.

The car a shiny metal box; inside, dusty upholstery, a dense smoke silence; outside, the afternoon world, a lick of highway leaping. Road death, Popeye had one split second to think. Time shapes the vehicle; space fills it. What here is artificial? What heavenly? Then some moon got inside his head to project the future. Pedestrians standing round, and somebody saying, turn off the engine turn off the engine turn off the engine! Out he stepped and started to march, started to run, then the cop laid fingers on his shoulder. The emergency work crew worked the jaws of life more than an hour to get Blue and Coy out—Coy already dead. Grandparents came from the home across the street and said nice things, shook heads. Old folks being so friendly that he nearly cried remembering—it felt like remembering—some ache, some grief, a cry he had when crying was simple. The driver gets away, jaws of life, the driver always gets away, tries to run.

Holy shit.

Crumpled white Olds.

Concussion changed the grandparents grey.

I yam what I yam and that's all what I yam!

How many times has it happened? Every day the same, the same. Similar distance home from work and even the light from the sky seems green. Night cuts through the park and already the children are saying goodbye to one another. He follows the girl in green socks, calls her Olive, puts his hand on her shoulder much as the cop did to him: desperation in the gesture, anger, desire. Puts arms about her—carefully, as if she might break—and she turns into a round woman fat and warm as new bread, the softness of her pushing at his arms.

Fastenings

As though the sky has burst or his heart, he loves everything and has to sit on the ground he's so happy. He leans back against her strong legs and looks up at her face and wants to cry. He reaches behind and grasps one of the woman's big toes, holds it in his fist.

That feels nice, she says.

Oh yes, he says. Oh yes.

Before she takes him home they go shopping for flowers at a corner

store. The way she puzzles over selection astonishes him: watching her broad shoulders, head inclined, blue eyes appraising foliage and colour, he's shocked back to the middle of things, things separate and familiar, things on trial.

Dear God.

I feel strong, he tells her. Grab my shirt and we'll take a spin over the metropolis.

Me? she says. You must be joking.

OK, he says, I'll grab you. You will be my dirigible!

I don't know what that is, she says. What is that?

He holds her—he holds her all the way home, all night, whispers that he plans to hold her into next week, into the months ahead, as often as he can, if she'll let him.

She says that's all right by her because one thing she is is nervous. Since coming to this city she fears being alone and available at night. Noises scare her. She says maybe soon she'll be able to sleep without the gun under the bed.

You got a gun under the bed?

She shrugs. One thing she wants to make really clear: she doesn't want him to pretend, she will know if he tries to match her skin with other skins he remembers or imagines. Her skin is soft and has little tucks and folds and she wants him to know it that way. It isn't the skin of the little girl she once was.

No way, says Popeye. I will never regret the transformation you have made—

Because I fell for you, she says, is no reason for you to take me for granted.

Right, he says. No, that is a gift.

Once that first evening she catches him with a puzzled expression stroking her brow and asks, What is it? and he answers, Nothing, sweetheart.

He wants all children to rise up and witness his love.

Perched on her back before sleep, he prays, Please, Lord, make me whole and good.

Next morning he hefts the rifle outside and empties it into the air. Crows squawk in a mad flap and from line to glinting line in the brand new sun. He cleans and oils the gun, wraps it in a sheet, stores it on the linen closet's highest shelf.

He gives up his place by the park and moves downtown with Olive. Their love sends him to sleep dreaming of cherubim. She takes him to the zoo to visit her favourite penguins who are named Ruffles and Cleavage. Moths in the house terrify her; he catches a big silver-eyed specimen in

cupped hands and throws it from the window to the early street; the flutterer spins into brief freedom before a baby robin makes the kill; Olive gasps at the quick papery crunch. She makes blueberry pancakes. He says he worships her with all his unshaven heart. She gives him a parrot. He takes her to the old park, asks her to sit down on the swing, but she will not. He wants her to go inside a piano store, wants them to play Chopsticks at a glossy grand, he saw it in a movie once, but she won't go. She buys him gold cuff links at a garage sale. They grope each other under newspapers during feeding time. Ruffles and Cleavage eat a lot of herring, some of it still frozen, Popeye is sad to note. He hangs his head and she tickles behind his ears. The parrot loves the cuff links. So many flowers it takes—the names of which he can never remember—to please her enough.

From time to time he thinks to be with men, he wants to be black and white, off the wall. He feels short of breath so he smokes a pipe and sits late in his recliner and dreams of his fights. When Olive gets up middle of the night to pee, he is dozing, naked to the waist, the parrot asleep on his puny shoulder, its dirt swirls drying in the fur above his nipple. Startled, he yells: Go for it! Before properly sensible he's talking about his salad days when everything was off the wall, how crazy and funny life was. Off the wall.

What does that mean? Olive wants to know. Salad days. And off the wall like a picture, do you mean? Like someone took down a picture?

No, he says.

Give me a for instance, she says.

She stands big and pink and naked in the middle of the room. And he remembers for her the time he worked up north on the islands with a chainsaw crew killing roadside alder so the trucks could get out with their load of douglas fir and how on the ferry they always said to the Indian deckhand: Haida! instead of Hi there! and how one day the foreman, a guy they called Brute, said OK you dumbnuts you got the ball I ain't playing nursemaid no more. And how next morning everyone's punchy, Popeye's not even driven off the ferry when someone cracks a case, one of the guys bites a pillow in half, and Popeye's thumping gas screaming down the road in the company pickup, howling, goosedown flying, he can hardly see the gravel or the trees, feathers everywhere like snow falling real slow, and the foreman turns to him and blows feather smoke-rings, old Brute's dark as a bruise and choking and someone gives him a beer and he just croaks: I didn't expect you guys to pass the ball back so fast!

Olive says no thanks, she wouldn't want to be anywhere near off the wall.

I won't even think about it, she says, going back to bed, it makes no sense.

He calls the bird Jerusalem after a hymn.

Olive enrolls in a night course in English.

Dozy evenings on the chair, he drinks beer from the can. Waits for the headache. Arms wishing to enfold again the slender green girl. Hand crumpling the thin metal. Popeye tells his parrot that once upon a time Olive's fat was all right. What he needed was fat to begin with and she kept him happy by putting on weight—he couldn't get enough of her and the more he wanted the more was provided.

He opens his mouth for the bird to pick his teeth.

But now look! Popeye blows in the ruffled neck feathers. Some of that fat is a baby!

Some is child and some honest flesh, but he can't tell what from what.

In his mind he shaves her, like carving a tree, strips her to a thin hard dowel that he then treats with water and heat to make supple. But the child resists: bump under the gloss, dark knot.

He is not unhappy. He wants to attend pre-natal classes, to be involved, directly involved in Olive's processes. She is not interested.

Let the baby alone, she says, let my body do what comes natural, she says, I'm taking a hold of my life.

The bird tugs his ear. Misery, misery. His best friends are dead. No more excitement, not even aching loneliness, not even guilt. He and the parrot whistle the organ introduction to *A Whiter Shade of Pale.*

Olive is full of strange ideas, odd notions. Weird. Such as exclaiming all the time, Mississippi rain! Wanting broccoli every meal. Such as watching herself in the mirror repeat school school school school. Wanting to name the baby Swee'pea, be it boy or girl.

Holy mother! says Popeye. You gotta be joking.

It goes with our handles, she says.

It sure the hell does! Come on. Swee'pea the Sailor?

No, she says. Swee'pea Oyl.

Oyl? says Popeye.

Oh, Popeye, says Olive. Oh, Popeye.

Jerusalem, he croons at the bird, and together they whistle the hymn. They sing Jerusalem right through to the first cigar.

Popeye stands in the darkening room feeding the baby, his child Swee'pea, a male with a kiss curl. Beautiful, beloved, simple and good.

When did Olive begin saying Oh Popeye like that? Once it was an endearment, love talk, now it sounds as if she's angry, or truly disappointed in him, for everything.

Jerusalem perches on the edge of Popeye's dinner plate finishing the mashed potatoes, sneezing. Outside, bats zigzag between the yellow birches. The house creaks a bit, settling. The family car purrs up the street, driver's side low to the ground, and Popeye whispers, Here she is, here she is!

Till the white Oldsmobile grows small in Popeye's memory. Though baby Swee'pea is evidence of his basic goodness, he falls from grace oftener than seldom. Screaming fits. When the credit cards are not paid on time. When the housekeeping goes to rack and ruin. When Olive does not dress before noon.

When she tries to talk to him about her studies.

All in his life is too full too round too colourful. He wants the illusion of distance, but not distance itself.

He transfers to night shift in the hope that Olive will stay home with the child. She hires a babysitter instead. He misses his evenings with Swee'pea and Jerusalem, but likes the empty streets, likes the way night covers him with a dark stripe, knows it to be earth's shadow under which he labours: it will be lifted at dawn.

One midnight his brakes fail and when he goes off the road he bangs his head. He leaves the vehicle in a hedge and walks home, feeling strangely nervous. He sees himself moving through the city as through a sequence of rooms, as if he's going cel to cel in a cartoon, frame to frame in a movie. At each place the scenery is different. It's odd to be a pedestrian at this hour; he memorizes the make and year of each car that crosses his path.

He's on a treadmill. In his head he works out his credit ceiling, then paints the house, buys a motorcycle, visits cities and countries in a widening circle—what colour the house? the bike? what kind of paint? bike? what about Asia? Africa?—then, to calm his pounding heart, he bleeds the brakes, fills the master cylinder, and test drives the truck.

At home all is quiet, occluded, and he's accurate with his key, enters noiselessly, slipping into the bathroom and closing the door before turning on a light. He undresses and scrubs his hands and face. He's in the middle of cleaning his teeth when the entrance fills with pink flesh, gun barrel; he's heard nothing; he swallows toothpaste.

Olive blinks at him; the rifle slowly lowers.

Still she grows fatter.

Nights at work, he loves to think of her walking, how slow she moves. Inside that three-dimensional body she is the most beautiful person he

has known. The way she gazes at him, at their son. The way she can look hurt.

Mornings, he dreams of straight up and down women with black eyes.

When he and Olive make love, he is somewhere else; he can't understand what their bodies are doing, what the different parts might be for, what the names he's learned to give the parts might mean. Driving, he is elsewhere; orders have to be repeated to him over and over; radio dispatch is angry; he gets lost on streets he should know. He has no more headaches, no more pain at all. The world comes to him in numbered units; events happen in boxes, and human beings have little tinny voices. He is sometimes so exultant that he thinks he will die of ecstasy.

One Sunday, in a golden production full of laughter that makes him completely happy, or close to it, he bounces Swee'pea high in the air and in the moment before catching the child receives Olive's finest most secret smile. And it doesn't matter his pitch is rusty, or that his son crawls away to win her heart—he's in awe of her, of them both. And he knows, sure as he knows his mind's a wiped slate from a week of mixed-up nights, that if they were to drive, the three of them, for ice cream cones every Sunday afternoon for ever, that the sun would always shine.

When he's fired he stays home and plays with Swee'pea till noon, then they roam the city together and call Olive at dusk to come pick them up. The intersection names he gives her are the funniest shape in his mouth.

Olive, he says one evening, here's how it happens. We are going to sell up and leave, move south. We need a new start on things.

Where south?

We will look, he says, we will start looking. We can drive out this weekend, set off early Saturday and drive, just drive. We will find someplace to camp and on Sunday take a boo at the country. Next weekend check out a different highway. Land is cheap in the sticks. We will start looking.

Out of words, he looks across the table through the coffee steam. Olive is just sitting there, big as a circus tent balanced on the chair, gazing way off.

Honey, we gotta do it, he says. Show our boy the world isn't made of parking lots. Maybe find a dairy town and buy fresh milk. Show him there's places he can quench his thirst on other than Classic.

He knows she thinks he will have forgotten about it come Saturday, but he's determined. He ties knots in all his socks, in every shirt sleeve, twists a hair pin around his razor. He will remember, and then they will see what they will see. They address each other with great politeness for the rest of the week. He looks at her carefully and is aware she is study-

ing him. And on the morning in question they are indeed all three wide awake, loading the car with camping supplies and slipping under the dash maps of all counties to the south. As Olive turns the wheel and signals to leave the curb, Jerusalem shrieks from the blanketed cage. Popeye leans back to check Swee'pea's seat fastenings and the belt that holds the cage, and he marvels to himself at the surprising lack of effort it took to get them on the road.

Jerusalem

Rubber whispers under steel springs. The country through which they drive so fast boasts no God, Popeye thinks, only a smudge of colour over what keeps a world intact. His thoughts somersault along this land divided into rectangles by long straight grooves and thin perpendicular structures.

He stares.

There are live sun-shaped objects lying inside every right angle.

Something of this imprints his mind.

He has always been more at home in forest and field, Swee'pea will likely fall in love, Jerusalem will learn new songs, Olive will not seem so large. In time, there will be for his son if not for him the beautiful woodcutter's daughter. . . .

Cows, says Swee'pea. His first word. Cows.

A hand grasping a can fills Popeye's head, fingers squeezing till the can bursts: a fanfare. His child crawls blithely along scaffolding high above some new city: every time Swee'pea's about to step into space, a girder slides into position, the building extends and the child continues. Moment by moment death by falling is transformed into the building's thrust: cranes swing steel into place; Swee'pea's ignorant progress is a dizzying dance above nothing but the blank breeze.

The driver escapes the jaws of life, oh yes, his own hand moves to trace a rainbow's far curve. The time has come for turning inside out. He loves Olive and Swee'pea and soon will reach them. Their blood is green and they are not vulnerable to his protection. How can he do what he has learned best to do, how can he save them? He will have to step outside and be God's hand, lift the car, lift the car.

Oh, look what you've done, says Olive. Look at you.

Between his thighs the wet pee has soaked into the seat, and his trousers are warm and sodden. His fingers tremble. Some liquid like mercury glistens on the hard surface of his nails.

You drive, honey, he says. I don't feel so good.

Oh, Popeye! I am driving!

When the car stops and they get out to clean up, Swee'pea trots down into the ditch. A transport roars past: furious warrior etched into the windshield. Popeye listens to the succeeding quiet, feels it weight the air between his family members. A fine mesh falls. A line grid settles his mind; limits are drawn, distances measured. Through this gossamer grid he watches light run across the valley, clouds churn on the road. Recognition stuns a single frame alive. He has peed his pants and it doesn't matter.

In the distance someone is singing a high sweet song. Light is escaping from where land and country imperfectly fit. A brilliant glimmer shocks Popeye into bliss; he is organized, his head is empty, his heart's in his mouth: as though from a great distance he sees the others pause and look round as if to ascertain one another's safety, gaze farther as if to see what happened, what has changed.

At last his fingers relax.

And he sees this, that the Ragg brothers' child was taken to a house in this countryside. That the child's brief accidental sleeping mother let go.

And it's the brothers' baby singing. The baby sings. She sings. Delighting all who meet her, she sings, and her adoptive parents explain she has always sung, since her arrival she has sung. She has not grown, still does not sleep the night through, but wakes them with a song.

Frustrated. Hungry. Glad. In such words the parents describe the way their baby sings.

John Donlan

Lack and Its Opposite

The change of the moon can do it.
The weather clears, you look up into that face,
cold and gleaming, the very different sister
of the one in you who was teary, blotched and desperate,
wringing her hands before too many unwanted futures.
Something shrinks. You're practical again,
unafraid, and ready to be happy.
In the shift between feeling and thinking
the hot pictures
spurt out of the ground.
The glue of everydayness
coats the unseen.
Our crazy images stick to its shape,
outlining some same thing within us.
At least that's the plan.
When I see where I'm going I take another tack,
plunge into the bush where the going's harder,
progress means death, and the lichen says
This wasn't made for you
so watch until you find how you belong.

Notes On Contributors

Laurie Block is a poet, storyteller and child-care consultant working and living in Winnipeg. He has been in several Canadian magazines, and is the author of *Governing Bodies* (Turnstone Press, 1988). He is working on his next collection of poems under the title of *Laughing Matter.*

Kim Carter lives and writes in Nepean, Ontario.

John Donlan is working on *Baysville,* a collection of poems from which "Lack and Its Opposite" is taken, and translating his first book, *Domestic Economy* (Brick Books, 1990), into French. He lives in London, Ontario.

Cynthia Gabrielli lives in Manchester, New Haven. She has this to say about her work in this issue of PRISM: "Translating is a serious game, a wit- and emotion-sharpener, and when the fit is right, as Montale's *Mottetti* are for me, an obsession. I hope Montale would feel the same—that the fit is right."

Danuta Gleed lives and writes in Ottawa.

Steven Heighton won the Gerald Lampert Award for best first book of poetry with *Stalin's Carnival* (Quarry, 1989). "Five Paintings of the New Japan" will be included in *Flight Paths of the Emperor,* a collection of Japanese stories to be published next spring by Porcupine's Quill. He lives in Kingston and is the editor of *Quarry* magazine.

Anne M. Kelly has a degree in creative writing from the University of Victoria. Recent and forthcoming publications include *Canadian Literature, Prairie Fire, The Fiddlehead,* and *Grain.*

Michael Kenyon currently lives on Pender Island, British Columbia. His stories have appeared in *Epoch* and *Canadian Fiction Magazine.* His first novel, *Kleinsberg* (Oolichan Books), was released in March of this year as was a collection of prose poems, *Rack of Lamb* (Brick Books).

Ingrid Macdonald's short fiction has appeared in Canadian and British anthologies of lesbian writing. "Travelling West" is part of a collection of short stories called *Catherine, Catherine,* forthcoming from The Women's Press, Toronto, Fall 1991. Ingrid is currently a participant in The Banff Centre for the Arts' May writing studio.

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jb Warren lives in Bragg Creek, Alberta. She has degrees from McMaster University and the University of Calgary. jb has taught school, waited tables and has even been turned into a tiger in a stint as a magician's assistant. Her poetry has appeared in *Prairie Fire*, and her fiction will be appearing in upcoming issues of *The Malahat Review* and *Canadian Fiction Magazine*.

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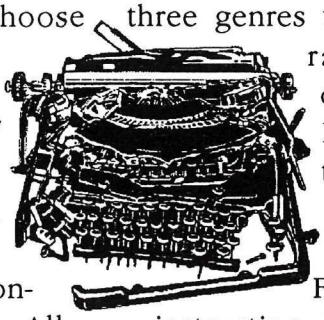

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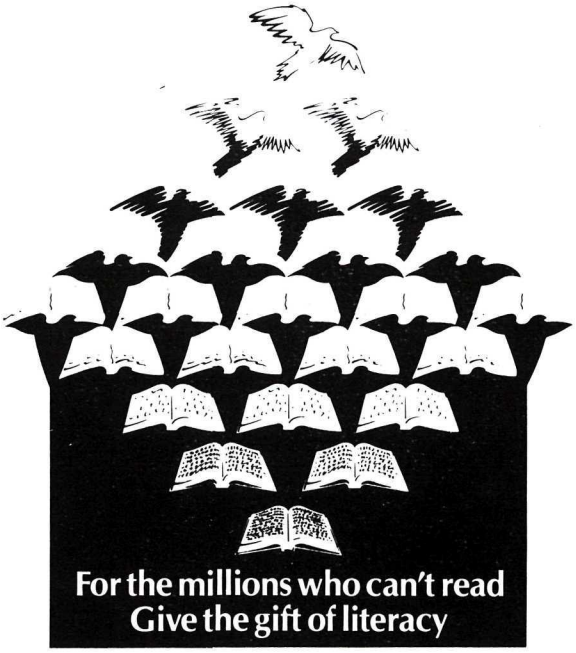

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