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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World

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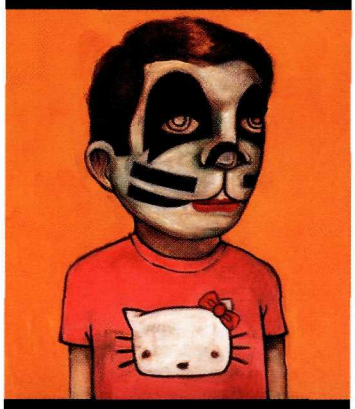

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UBC's Creative Writing Residency Prize in Stage Play 2003

Residency Prize – $10,000

Michael McGuire
"La frontera"

Shortlist

Nick Carpenter
"Stained Glass"

Trina Davies
"Explosion"

Victor Lodato
"Little"

Paul Quarrington
"The Geography of the Bedroom"

Caridad Svich
"Steal Back Light from the Virtual"

Judges

Glynis Leyshon, Artistic Director
Vancouver Playhouse Theatre

Stephen Heatley, Faculty
UBC Theatre Program

Bryan Wade, Faculty
UBC Creative Writing Program
and Residency Prize in Stage Play Director

Sherry MacDonald, PRISM Drama Editor
and Residency Prize in Stage Play Coordinator

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George McWhirter

From There to Here: Poetry in This Place

Since 1968 George McWhirter has been advisor to what he calls PRISM*'s "Poetry Pickers." This year, George retires; before he goes, we've asked him to leave us with a few words about the state of poetry in Canada. Here they are.*

Thanks, George.
The Eds

Many pilgrims, who set out in search of a poetic with Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, Black Mountain, and "projective" verse as a guide, now lodge at the Inn of the Post-Mod. Michael Bullock, the last orthodox surrealist alive, is in Vancouver, and Don Domanski—perhaps the only if not card-carrying then practising Canadian surrealist—is writing in the Maritimes. Out of TO-man Dennis Lee's long, meditative line of thought, came the long, longer, longest lines of Ontario in the late seventies and eighties, which spanned the solemnities of Pier Giorgio de Cicco and the rollickings of David Donnell, or image and idiom analytics of major geological and other matter by Christopher Dewdney. The line leads on, cross-country as soul and social meditation, into the measure of Brad Cran, resident *Geist*-er. As continuing experiment, it finds a point of return and departure in the eponymous *West Coast Line*. But where to toe it, where to break it?

Our golden oldie poets, including our Poet Laureate, have simplified their raves on inspirations, guides, and poet soul-mates, to a few never-failing faves and old friends. Poems about the poem became poems about the language, which some—Adeena Karasick and kin—perform, appropriately, as verb-jazz, where suffix and prefix, root and offshoot, riff like musical/versical *frères* of Mozart and Django Reinhardt. The carapaced and seed-catalogued children of Robert Kroetsch still join the Metonymists and scuttle as sideways as the Alberta crab to pick up all related detail. Is poetry in Saskatchewan, the *primum mobile* of the CCF and Medicare, movement-less or too caring a community of versifiers for factions? Still, true-hearts in the centrelands want to entitle only the serious penny for verse investment. That other Socred couplet for currency—*If it's funny, / it's better than money*—they cannot abide.

God bless Al Purdy's core Canadian anecdotalists, who beguile with rambling and tall, well-obscured, intellectual overviews of brawly wit and wisdom. Who are the new fill-in's for the Kingston trio, David Helwig, Stewart McKinnon and Tom Marshall—Dan Moses and...? Coast to coast, confessors still cozy up to sores and suicides; as Mexican poet Victor Manuel Mendiola laments, "The disease of North American poetry is confession, and of Latin America, abstraction!" Purists and simplifiers poem everything in "the real language of men" and women, so no one will get them, or it, wrong (will Willie Wordsworth never die?). The lyricists lament the stale repetitiousness of the mode (will spontaneity never change?) while Poet-reviewers like Diana Bryden ask why poets continue to use the form if they are not going to do anything other than sing with it? No end for nostalgia or apocalypse ever—the lyrical muse keeps dying, a lovely Cleopatra at the twin tusks of her adder.

From Eastern Canada, we have heavy-weight contenders for brave new form and lingo: Bök and Boswell, the latter straining the verb-vine toward a vintage that is truly Boswellian, and the former, playing the hypertrophies of a device that deserves to be sold on the market as a poetry game. The measure for measure slug-of-war over formalism continues in the Wide World of Wrestling Words. Forms are favoured in early university and college classes because they give the poetically challenged (and aren't we all?) a framework to begin with; danger is, neophytes will make the moves without the matter, but as Wilde says, if they have the moves, it doesn't matter. For every one of those who whip hell for leather into formal adventure, and whose consummation is contrivance (think *Kink* on that omnichannel documentary,) there is one (like yours truly) who goes cloaking their rhyme and cutting off, with daggers of understatement, the bloodiest hyperbole.

Along with the performance poets, counter-Fawkeses bent on blowing up, with their own breath, a parliament of out-loud, histrionic verse that has been long while dissolved and fighting to extract the legislated page from its throat, we have the "work poets" still working, lyrical pol-poets, like Gary Geddes, finding they have sociologically obsessed kids in Michael Turners. Our Frank Sinatras and Nat King Coles, who work within their range repeatably and unforgettably intimate, like Don of the lattermost surname, John Newlove, and The Don McKay, are revived and alive in poetry's Bublés: David O'Meara and the like. But who succeeds the sly, wry yuk-yuk at it all of Lionel Kearns...Billeh Nickerson?

To realign a point from my friend Homero Aridjis, "Poetry from everywhere and anywhere, every c-ist and c-ism, comes up where it can in the annual change-over of editorship at PRISM *international*."

if they take away our brains weul still remembr if
if they take away our brains weul still remembr if
they take away our minds weul still recall if we find
ourselvs missing weul find each othr aftr all if they
ourselvs missing weul find each othr aftr all if they
take away our brains weul still remembr if
take away our brains weul still remembr if
away our minds weul still recall if we find
away our minds weul still recall if we find
our brains weul still remembr if they take
our brains weul still remembr if they take
minds weul still recall if they take away
minds weul still recall if they take away
weul find each othr aftr all if we find ourselvs missing
weul find each othr aftr all if we find ourselvs missing

aria 4 isis

air ria ria ara is si if onlee yu wud phone me huh
if onlee yu wud cum 2 me if onlee yu wud call what is
2 tangenshul 2 realize 2 see whn yu feel a suddn feer
what gets yu ther what gets yu what gets yu heer
what gets yu ther did yu dreem uv th goddess in th
ode 2 isis let go 2 th gods who take care uv
us th spirit beings who help us ar they ther
in th novakane vallee eye found yu on th road 2 isis
in th horshu canyun i cud heer yu i cud heer yu
dew yu beleev we have identitee apart from memoree
wher duz our soul go duz it go is it alwayze heer
ther n evreewher on th go sew travelling isis a rivr
undr in southrn nebraska
th umbrella uv th galaxee dew yu feel
th frvour dew yu feel th kontentment th whirling n
still being dew yu feel th love nitemares uv trains
hurtuling thru th nite dew yu feel ignorant thrill
th ride o isis th summr tides dew we kling 2 our
talking bears our sumtimes reluktant monkeez
hold them sew loos n sew tite tryin area arena
2 get all th furnitur in my room against th door 2
keep th door shut against th tall baritone cummin in
2 strap me th zeon wear th fabrik th tapestree
we ar walking thru as i know yu sew try 2 cum 2 me
cum 2 me kiss me all ovr cum 2 me
along th tangentshul watr slides th rivr we know
th rivr we call opn my eyez th rivr we dont know
th rivr we dont know we cAn change th skripts we inherit
th see monstrs ar layduling fine he sd eyeing th
isis a farming town in northern saskatchewan eyeing th
dissolving mountin perls n rainbows glide if yu onlee
yu wud phone me if onlee yu wud cum 2 me iul weer
aneething yu want tho i know thats not kool aneething longs
its safe if onlee yu wud call yu wud call call call call

i herd th toastr titul sing in my masculine reveree

i herd th toastr sing ths morning a rathr mourn
ful sound valise valees VA LEES
what erthlee meening cud that impart i had no
idea

n i cud heer furthr as i sippd on my grapefruit juis
th elevatora goez BOOF outside n down th
hall thn kreeklee n splatchlee n a possibul figur
approaching on th slitelee staind hall karpeting pit
pall papal popal opal pipul pifful papal opa opo lo ap l
polo pipul pafful popal papal palap pa lips al olo lo op
lop pop pap pap a popal a papal pull up papal popal
poop popal papal pip ip papal pipul pal pal po op po
ooop loop pool ap ap pa apo lop a o loop

a size uv loafr prhaps a littul 2 large 4 th weerer
had sumwun resentlee just left
door knok
i opend

i walkd back a bit as he enterd n thn he approachd me
konsepts whirling in my hed inside outside singing
toastrs intensyunal follee papal pollee wants a
he moovd tord me touching my nippuls
n sd as he pulld me tord him n down
my name is matthew poindexter

at second blush i rathr doubtid ths sweet assersyun
as he n i nevr met b4 arrangd n sought a love 4 our
selvs in th desolate world n war weeree envelope uv
time n space wud th elevator go bonf BONF
agen th grapefruit cud wait

Eric Paul Shaffer

Lovers on Pulehu Road, Between the Sugar Mill and the Maui County Dump

His beat-up green pickup faces Haleakakâ, her thrashed
Celica toward Kmart, on the shoulder of Pulehu Road. The lovers
stand in roadside mud, arms encircling
each other, gazing over a field of sugar cane at two boiling columns
of smoke rising from the mill. They stand too close to be casual,
toes dirtied where they hang over the slipper's edge.
The afternoon reveals they should not be here, should not be
together, that only half their hearts attempt
to conceal their meeting. I drive past, but they do not look over,
knowing everyone on the island knows everyone else.
Not wanting to see themselves seen, their heads remain turned
away. My windows are down, and the stink of the dump rattles
the white plastic bags tangled in the *kiawe* trees.
I'm glad they let me pass without a glance. I don't want to know
whose wife she is or who his children are
or recognize a Safeway cashier or a metre-reader for Maui Electric.
My mirror shows unmoved lovers embracing
beneath ragged, windy limbs as trash cartwheels across the road.
They know the road to the dump is far too public
for a lover's lane, and they have not forgotten their families
and their friends drive this red-stained, two-lane blacktop
to throw away what they no longer want, what they have used
beyond use, and all the many things they have broken.

Michael Trussler

The Grocery Store is Willing to Sell

1.

Us.
Everything.

I choose the usual fruit, the Mexican
refried beans you love (just in case you
drop by someday,) puritanical celery
and cigarettes, walk away from
the many ways you can eat
chicken, the wintergreen
chewing gum. I'm looking

for eye-glass cleaner, having
broken down finally—I've got one bottle
in my office, another at my
ex-wife's, but I need one I can
carry with me. My face
sweats so much sometimes it's
like snails are copulating
on the lenses. The Bosc

pear is a freckled green and
brown breast—perfect for
my camera later. There are
enough toothbrushes to polish
the boots of every cop in
a city larger than this
one. Condoms, I discover, are
more detailed and energetic
than when I first bought them.

What's different today
is the woman who entered
the store behind me: she's
been leading a blind
man with a grocery cart
and just now he's following

her voice through a canyon
that leads to milk and
his favourite cheese. I feel a
little odd when I see the lens
cleaner in the basket, but this kind
of irony is lazy, arbitrary; it's fastening
a constellation onto what
isn't there. When

I leave the store
I glance at the newspaper headlines:
some roofers in Montreal were
burnt alive yesterday while
tarring a roof. A teenage boy
told the reporter that they
looked like stunt men in a movie.

2.

I've been to Montreal, licked
so much wine off a woman there the
sheets that afternoon looked as if
a sweating Dionysus had made the bed
his nest. I've also worked on a flat roof
with steaming tar a dozen floors
above the ground; it's hard, evil—
smelling, and dirty work.

Even after a shower
small leopard spots stick
to your skin. It's true
too that a poem should
live between ambling

images, should contain as many
vowels and hard, surrendered
velvets as a grocery store
holds food and other things that sleep
until someone chooses
to buy them. Sometimes
I believe that the only
honest writing is
the list: pear, blind
man, death in a shit
job. Unsmudged
glasses. But I've

been home now for
over an hour, noticed folks
carrying plastic bags filled
with what they like, or
need. Did anyone notice
me doing the same thing,
notice my Our Lady
Peace toque, divine
what I was carrying
in my loosened
head? Someone has

thrown a smoke onto
the road. Someone else just
emptied a cauldron above me
off the apartment roof—what's coming down
are all the days those
men in Montreal
will never live
to ignore. The spew
is translucent, almost lemon, something

tender and savage, something
that will never mean much
to the rest of us as we
continue leaving grocery stores
with what we're strong enough
to carry home with
our hands. Only you

can see inside
to the bottom
of this collection
of words, these
disasters of timing. Tell
me, will

3.

you bring the fangs
I sent you when you visit
me? You can wear them
safely. I poured boiling
water over them before I placed
them in the envelope. Be
careful though, be careful
with the way you approach
the words you find yourself
having to use. Words want

to be touched—sometimes
with talons, sometimes with a
geisha's hands. If angered, words
will make light bulbs explode
in your apartment, leaving tiny

tungsten wires hanging
down like the poison negligee
jelly fish thread just beneath
the sea's surface after a storm.

4.

I've bought some small
swans and a wandering
string of pearls to play
with you. But no one can
turn death into life
anymore, and I want

to know why the world
contains burning men, Bosc
pears, and also makes this night that only
minutes ago told people to turn
on their headlights. I want
to know what fragments
move toward. Repeating

them is strangely
simple: some people are more
than half-crazed in Quebec; I didn't
take a photo of the pear, merely
ate it—it was so hard I won't
need to floss my teeth later, but
I did use a window ledge
to place swans beneath
a Black Maria playing
card. And, on the wall, I've
glued a woman who is as voiceless

as a giraffe as she inserts
a candle into her nineteenth-
century quim. When words
eventually come to her she
tells me about the future

rising behind me, the one
I can't begin to see because
of my specific past. People there, I'm
told, have orchestras
shaking inside them, and entire
populations line the edges
of high-rises to watch
a new species
endlessly divide within

the surprised air, and nothing, I'm
told, remains interchangeable, nothing
is left unclaimed.

Adam Honsinger

A Crack in Everything

"If we don't leave, I'll have to kill him."

My brother's words were echoing in my head as I shuffled down the driveway. His footprints ahead of me were marked by intermittent drops of red in the falling snow. We had grabbed our stuff on the fly—a roll of toilet paper, a portion of which my brother had stuffed up his bleeding nose, two sleeping bags, a half-pound of weed, and our dog, Biscuit, who fit without complaint into my backpack along with a change of clothes and my squeegee gear. My brother was already near the corner when I was at the end of the driveway. He always walked fast when he was wound-up, as if he was trying to leave his feelings behind. Chip off the old block. I felt numb as I dribbled my brother's basketball down the sidewalk. I didn't even turn when I heard the old man raging at the front door. "You'll be back. Mark my words. You goddamn kids will be back!" He was too much of an asshole to bother to put on his shoes and come after us.

Duke was waiting for me at the bus station with two one-way tickets to Vancouver.

"The rain's gonna suck," he said. "But at least we won't freeze to death."

I leaned my head up against the foggy window. "Jesus Christ," I sighed, and at that moment felt a sense of hopelessness that pushed me further into the need of my newly forming habits.

We arrived in Vancouver at seven in the morning, cherry trees blooming—an unexpected sunny day. We started working the traffic outside the train station, a busy intersection with good long reds. Samantha was the first person we met. She had been watching us for a while, leaning up against a mailbox, chain-smoking cigarettes. She walked right into traffic, completely ignoring the squealing tires and blaring horns, to where we were standing on the island between the opposing lanes.

"You guys got any papers?" she asked, and, despite his frantic barking, she started patting Biscuit.

"Word of advice," she said, while we were both fishing around in our backpacks. "This is Jimmy's corner. You boys better fuck off if you know what's good for you."

Duke placed a large flower top of Mexican red in her hand, and she brought us home.

***

Samantha lived in a crack house next to a Buddhist temple on Keefer Street. She recommended tying Biscuit up in the backyard. The living room had a tan leather couch and a coffee table made out of two milk crates with a mirror resting on top. There were candles stuck in the ends of empty wine bottles all over the floor. The wall behind the couch had holes in it and was strung with Christmas lights. Aside from the fact that it was a shit hole, there was something strange about the house. We followed Samantha into the kitchen where she introduced us to her roommates who were heating up a large can of beans with a propane torch. I don't know who actually owned the place, could have been Jimmy, or Lewis, or Nigel. I figured it wasn't Samantha because she looked native and everything that they had ever owned had been taken away from them. I guessed it was inherited—probably Jimmy's, because he looked Chinese and this was a Chinese neighbourhood, and he talked the loudest.

When Duke rolled a six-paper fatty they abandoned the beans—and while the six of us stood in the space where you'd expect to find a table and chairs, Jimmy gave us the once-over. "We could use a big guy like you around here," he said, taking the joint from my brother. "Someone to answer the door, intimidate the deadbeats."

I felt a slight twinge of despair as we slowly descended to the kitchen floor in a cloud of blue smoke. And, as I slipped into the high, I realized what was odd about the house was that there was no hum of electricity. I felt a million miles a way from home in that quiet. The tinfoil opening tenderly in Samantha's hand sounded like the amplified blooming of a rose.

"You guys really want to fly?"

Later that afternoon when we got up, I felt like I was going to vomit. The room smelled like cat piss, the walls were yellow, and the door was charred on the inside from hinge to hinge. There was an old Canadian flag covering the entrance to the closet, which was full of empty Dr. Pepper cans. Samantha tapped on the wall with her long fingernails and stood in the doorway with Biscuit who was sniffing and scratching at the end of his leash. "Uh, this room's been empty for a while. You guys can stay as long as you chip in for rent."

"Beggars can't be choosers," was all that my brother said. He got no argument from me; I was busy puking out the window.

***

There was a high school across the street with a twelve-foot fence separating the sidewalk from the schoolyard. We watched the kids chumping up and down the court, travelling, throwing corkscrews, oblivious of key infractions. We watched in anticipation of the sound of the ball when it hit

the mark, sloughing through the only outdoor hoops we had ever seen with net on them. Basketball was one of the few things we did that truly took us into a comfort zone, a place of concentration and satisfaction. That night we tore strips out of the shins and ankles of our khakis on the twisted ends lining the top of the fence. Duke had a good four inches on me so I worked on my long shot, the ball hitting the net cleanly. He was a little clumsy, and a sore loser though so I bounced the odd one off the rim or went straight up against him when the score was close. But we always ended our court time with some hot-dogging, Harlem Globetrotting shit. We practiced and experimented with behind-the-back passes, fakes, and spins. It always took some begging, but eventually I'd get Duke to squat with his hands cupped so that I could actually reach the rim. And hanging there after a backboard shattering dunk, looking down on my feet high above the court, despite all the shit in the world, I felt like I was a god. I'd stay up there till my fingers gave out or Duke yanked on my pants, whichever came first.

***

We never got used to the fact that Jimmy and Lewis would regularly bust into our room and steal our shit. They left their footprints across our two mattresses, they left cigarette butts on the floor, and they confiscated anything they thought they could turn into rock or junk. We kept our ball hidden in the backyard under a tarp, a lesson learned not long after we moved in. I had a car stereo that I figured out how to hook up to a battery. The only CD we had was the one in the stereo when I got it, a Leonard Cohen disc called *The Future*, which we only played when the others weren't home. But in less than a month the stereo was gone. Jimmy, Nigel and Lewis were passed out on the living room floor, a cheap red candle, a burnt spoon, and a scrap of tinfoil on the coffee table; the slobs even shared one needle. I swear Jimmy would hawk his mother's ashes if he felt that the urn was worth anything. The car battery was left in the kitchen sink. It's still there.

When Biscuit went missing, I was really pissed. My brother said he must have run off, slipped through the hole in the screen door. "Maybe he's sniffing his way back home," he offered. I tried to imagine a dachshund out there on the Coquihalla making his way towards the Alberta border, but I knew Jimmy, Nigel and Lewis couldn't stand Biscuit's barking. They couldn't appreciate his guard dog potential.

"Fuck that," Jimmy said. "He barks at everything; he barks at you for fuck sake."

Jimmy laughed at me when I shoved him against the fridge. Unlike Duke, I got emotional when I got mad. I got teary-eyed and I couldn't follow through. Even though Jimmy was several years older and a few

inches taller than me, he was skinny as hell. But he was the kind of guy who might have cracked you in the head with a cast iron frying pan while you were sleeping. Duke had to step in.

"He's upset about the dog, Jimmy. We've had him since he was a puppy."

I knew Duke was pissed off too, but he was unpredictable; he could brew for hours, days, and sometimes weeks before he would explode. You never knew when it would happen, and it was rarely in the face of what inspired the anger in the first place. One night, I was driving low through the key coming up for a lay-up when Duke dropped me with an elbow to the face. I was on my ass, blood dripping onto my shirt, the ball coming to rest against the fence, Duke's outstretched hand helping me up. "That's for taking my last cigarette this morning." He was as bad as the old man sometimes.

Jimmy and Duke backed down when Samantha walked in the room. I heard the fork that Duke had clenched behind his back fall next to the car battery in the kitchen sink.

"You gotta keep a lid on it," Duke said later. "You gotta appreciate the fact that we have a roof over our heads for dirt cheap." He was right, and sometimes those shits would even share a score, although it was usually Samantha behind any communal gestures. She'd knock on the door too; she respected our privacy. She called getting high, "getting blissed." She'd do a little prayer, close her eyes and burn some sweetgrass before poking herself. "It's my religion," she'd say, "better than sex, and I don't like to pray alone."

***

Two days after my fifteenth birthday I lost my virginity to Samantha. I was sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette when she came home at about four in the morning. I hadn't seen her in a couple of days and I told her about my birthday. I didn't plan on it but it was practically the first thing that came out of my mouth, maybe because Duke completely forgot.

"So you're a man now," she said, one foot on the step, exposing a naked leg from under her fake fur coat.

I offered a smoke. She squinted at me in the darkness, "Yeah, I can see it, you look different."

I told her I thought she was beautiful.

The alleyway between our house and the Buddhist temple was narrow and filled with garbage—blown-out radials, busted lawn chairs, and stacks of unused shingles. Samantha insisted that I pay her first. I handed her twenty-five dollars up-front and she made me swear on a carton of Matinee extra-milds for later; she was slowly working her way down from hand-rolled Drum tobacco since she came home from a clinic with a pamphlet on emphysema two months before. She was a little on the skinny side, and

she wheezed when she breathed, but she was the kindest person I had ever met. It was later that I understood why her knees were sometimes bruised.

After she drew a fresh line of vanilla-flavoured chapstick across her lips she handed me back one of the tens. "Happy birthday," she said. I was speechless, up against the splintered siding of the house, my pants still around my ankles. I had never done any drug that made me feel better than I did right then. Was I closer to God? Did religion have anything to do with a soft warm mouth, a simple rhythm? I felt acknowledged—a combination of being seen and seeing at the same time. Like I was hanging from the hoop, but now it wasn't asphalt below me, but prime polished hardwood, a roaring crowd. Masturbation is desire, sex with someone is a kind of sharing, a belonging. I never told Duke, but he knew something was different about me.

"What is up with you these days?"

"I found religion."

"Fuck off."

***

Time tumbled and staggered in the chaos of that house. There are gaps in my memory. Nobody knew or cared what day it was. We stopped shooting hoops when we sold the ball to an old lady for twenty-eight dollars. I could see how relieved she was to be rid of us, waddling awkwardly up the street with a basketball pressed up against her chest, while Duke counted the change she had scooped out of the bottom of her purse with her trembling hands. Somewhere between here and there we had become part of the furniture of that empty house—broken unsalvageable shit—and by December we owed Jimmy twelve hundred dollars. He was getting thinner and talking louder, and was threatening to boot us out or cut our throats. We needed money, and more than that, we needed drugs.

Intimidation and bullying were one thing, but I refused to roll anyone.

"Fuck that Duke, I don't like the violence." He was shaking his head, pacing and swearing under his breath until I suggested breaking into houses—a step up from the car thefts and mall takes. "We can turn over electronics and jewelry fast and easy."

Duke's eyes brightened. He threw his arm around my shoulder. "Ok," he said, "now we have a plan and a reason to celebrate."

***

Normally, we reserved our invasions for the West End where the property value and quality of merchandise is much higher, but we were pretty whacked out on MDA, and the idea of a hot shower sounded as good as a steak dinner and cherry pie. We headed out into the rain, scoped the first house with no lights on, and went in through the basement window banging our knees on what turned out to be piles of stacked furniture. At least

in the dark, the stuff looked in good condition. Duke said we'd need a U-haul to get all that stuff out. The upstairs was empty except for a few scattered cushions and the pictures on the creamy yellow walls—no stereo, no TV, no computer. One room was draped with tapestries, nothing but seven white candles in front of a big marble statue. I felt strange in that room. It was so peaceful, even the hum of the refrigerator down the hall seemed in tune with the stillness.

The statue was cross-legged in the corner, about twelve inches tall, a giant flower resting in his cupped hands. I felt hypnotized, drawn in close, scratching at the bits of rice and tiny yellow flower petals on the hardwood floor. The statue's eyes were closed, and despite the hairline crack that ran from his left eyebrow to the top of his right ear, he looked content, his mouth revealing nothing—oblivious and aware in the same moment. If the Duke hadn't called me from the top of the stairs, I'm not sure if I would have stolen the statue or lit one of those candles. I was strangely attracted to the idea of both.

I remember the warmth. We didn't have heat or hydro and the February rain had been falling steadily for two and a half weeks. It had been a long time since I didn't feel a chill in my bones. We undressed down to our boxers in the soft glow the streetlight cast on the wall, drew the curtain and stepped under the steaming water. The soap smelled strange and woody, and my brother's voice humming softly made me smile in the dark. I could remember a time when we felt almost normal, the moments in-between when we were in a lull. It was like the turning of a page, the three of us at the dinner table, my father contentedly chewing on a pork chop, Biscuit under the table waiting for my next secret offering of cooked broccoli. Anything seemed possible in-between the raging fits and the drama of bipolar swings. Since we had left, those peaks of terror had flat-lined into a cold desperation and need—constant efforts to keep it all pushed down, the senses dullened by booze and drugs. Under the pulse of that hot shower we were warm and clean and high, a combination that we rarely experienced together.

"Next place we live, let's have hot water," I said.

"Yeah, and our own bedrooms."

"And we could get a new dog," I said optimistically.

"And some fuck'n furniture, no more milk crates for a coffee table," Duke said softly.

"Maybe we could get a couple of jobs," I offered, "stop using."

Even though my eyes were closed I could feel Duke move away, his body tensing. And I felt like I was standing next to my father. "Sorry," I whispered.

I was rinsing the conditioner out of my hair when we saw the headlights outside the window. Duke tore half the shower curtain down, grabbed his

clothes and frantically struggled to get his wet legs in his pants. I stood there unsure of what to do. I wanted to stay. Part of me was imagining finishing the shower with a cup of tea and a snack. Hell, I'd sit down to an hour of algebra if it meant I could end the night in a real bed. I wanted more of this strange serenity. But the Duke had that frantic look in his eye, the one that drove him to move so fast. He was already throwing his shoes and shirt out the window onto the roof of the porch when I turned the water off.

I could hear the front door opening downstairs when I heaved myself up onto the window ledge. I wanted to leave a note apologizing for the mess. I wanted to promise to come back and clean it up. I wanted to thank them for the half hour of bliss, explain that I had been touched, had realized the possibility and value of a home.

It was drizzling cold and steady. I could feel the cement slowly absorbing the heat from the bottom of my feet. Duke was gone, probably already home. I felt that same sense of loneliness that I felt when we left for the bus station. We had run away, travelled several hundred miles, spent the last six months chasing a high. I remembered my father's words, "You goddamn kids will be back." But, as I headed back to a house that I didn't really want to go to, I realized that we had never really left.

I could feel my nerves tightening, my mind rushing with adrenaline, my extremities going numb, gradually replacing the memory of warmth and comfort. But I locked it in, held it to my chest, and pushed from my heart. I pushed into a blindness, a detour from the awareness of the cold rain. I pushed up towards the surface into a state of sobriety. I pushed until I found myself above the turbulence on the other side of the fence; I stood there in my boxers and looked up at the hoop, my clothes in a soaking heap at my feet.

Admiel Kosman
translated from the Hebrew by Varda Koch Ocker

From the Songs of Sampson

Hang me, my beloved, with clothespins.
And I will rock all night. Against your window. Outside.

Please, hang me, my foreigner—with no affinity—shaking and shivering
with cold.
Hang hooks in my lack. Add them—like a solution—to the nailed skeleton.

Hang me on the arbitrary. And on the wondrous. On the unsearchable.
Hang me out of my mind, Delilah. Above the thread of the dangling event.

Hang me on my silence. Like a question.
Hung. Beaten. Crushed.

Look, only so, wordless,
and with an iron string threaded through my mouth—
will I tell you what is required.

This is How the Prime Minister in the Virgin Islands

This is how the Prime Minister in the Virgin Islands
eats a banana.
If he, who's a Prime Minister,
eats a banana like this,
we too, the young ones, shall follow
in his footsteps, and eat a banana like this.

Look, as he inclines
the entire body in one palm, he conjures
and seduces, both at once. He clasps the banana, a warm
body, with the right hand, a strong arm for always,
he doesn't abandon, he doesn't drop. I have a banana, I have a
banana, he gabbles with feeling.
I have a banana forever.

Indeed, if the Prime Minister doesn't let go of a mutinous
foolish lost banana that in his hand remains whole
naked without her covering, what shall we,
the wall-hyssop say to a banner?
I and my wife too march, carrying
in his footsteps with pride and righteousness even the
distress-drenched earth: the crazy insanity
in our islands,
naked and virginal
shy like the banana,
that was abused and persecuted, rotten and dank, that is also a symbol of
wanderings
and bondage and disgrace, and the Prime Minister in the Virgin Islands
who stubbornly
carried for years the banner of struggle and the mobs' battles, he didn't
slacken, he didn't consent
and to the good. The banana too insists on her right
to love. And she reacts: a spray of insolence and mold.

A capricious smell rises in the mob's nostrils at rape time
but our Prime Minister
still holds on to the Virgin Islands

with a tatter. Underwear, and the Prime Minister
in the Virgin Islands is shocked like a meteor,
in the lap, close to the heart, she lies, a mysterious banana
of light, and he
laughs, and like a grimace of a moon
fallen straight into a water barrel,
his mind became confused

the mind of the Prime Minister who holds
the repulsive squashed batter mixed before him
as a problem with no solution with no way out
from the political thicket in the bodily
passage deepening
from the principal shell
to the flesh.

I Became Head of Government or the Mouse's Tale

I became head of government in a country I led alone. By strength of hand.
I placed on one small table the screaming crowd, that is,
for now, my wife and the crew of children. And so, with a heavy
wooden staff, I went out wandering, armed. I went out to the living room alone.
I became head of government. My term in office was a stormy term.
Even though there was no opposer at home or balcony. My wife already
left the kitchen exiled screaming and pulling her hair. Who will defend us,
the mouse
of alienation. The stranger, the hider, went out of the closet and with a
calm smile struck her.
Only I was on the spot first to save. With a lifeguard cap I went out
of the room first. I became head of the steering committee,
head of a great courageous government that takes action.
Historical, I was also the first to go out of the room
in pants and a shoe in the hand to welcome him. To such a government,
of resourcefulness and vision, of security, creativity, and peace.

Of such a government of idealism and devotion, I became head
of such a great government that rows the administration nimbly. Like a
pickpocket
at the pockets' seam. My government had an enchanted flute, as the heart
yearned like sad evening tunes on the balcony. To its fortune at that time,
great miracles happened to me. They appointed me promptly
as head of government in one great strong country, when I could
shut—painfully—behind the mouse's tail—
both window and shutters.

Camilo Venegas
translated from the Spanish by Rosalind M. Gill

Almond

They are almond, not guava.
Condemned to dance their perfect litany,
those beautiful women of Cuba have been the keeping rhythm
since distant times.
When we put on a record,
they rise up from their chairs
and walk sideways past us,
so time can be read in the bareness of their half-nude backs.

They are almond, not guava.
But we have never had the chance to try them,
their taste is locked in, abstract and their odour is of things put away.
Condemned to dancing their eternal litany
moving in slow motion,
they turn again and open their arms.
Only now can we catch a glimpse of them,
between the dust of the Republic and the scratch of the record.

Jon Eben Field

Vancouver, B.C., 16/02/03

My grandfather told me
about the pile of fish
near Tsawwassen
that was twenty feet high
and one hundred in diameter
after the Japanese fishermen
were taken to war camps.

Kathleen Winter

Town With Moses

Leona desperately wants grass seeds for the patch Jeremy dug yesterday to have a look at the septic tank. Moses is watching her. He says, "Kentucky blue grass grows surprisingly well here," though she has said nothing about grass or seed. Some men around here really are named Moses. Denise, who cooks and cleans at the home, says this one's real name is Mark. Kind Denise, who once warned Leona the dogcatcher was trying to catch her beautiful cat. Leona doesn't mind calling Mark Moses if that's what he wants. He is tall when he's walking past to get gingerale at Morey's store, but short when she lets him into her house. Jeremy doesn't mind him in the house, he's not bossy like that.

On the town map, the home is labelled "old folks," but it's a halfway house for the mental hospital in St. John's. Most men there are baymen whose mothers died. Their mothers fried bacon, boiled rhubarb, bottled herring, hung long johns from their own sheep on the line, picked bakeapples, and died, their sons not knowing how to do any of the work. The sons were all right until the root cellars and Mason jars emptied. After five winters, some grandniece brought them in. Moses is not one of these men. Denise told her he killed his parents with an axe when he was young. In Leona's mind this isn't necessarily as bad as it sounds. She doesn't mention it to Jeremy.

Besides being half-clairvoyant, Moses is attentive and looks Leona in the eye. Denise cooks pork and potatoes and cabbage at the home, but sometimes Leona barbecues him a hamburger and he never says no to a cold beer. He talks while she hangs washing or tends the garden. This morning as she buried the tomato plants Hazel gave her, thinking you have to plant tomatoes here in the three seconds before iceberg wind gives way to the stultifying smack of hot lupins, Moses said, "There's two things wrong. One's stagnation."

"I'll agree to that," she said. She'd just got off the phone with her mother, a woman who appears static even when she is pouring coffee or taking curtains down to wash. She does these things with her quilted satin bathrobe rigid and her arms stuck out like oars. Even her eyes don't move, frozen like blueberries in her silver spectacles. She claims to wash her baseboards twice a week but you can't see how she can bend enough to do

it. Leona does not have curtains or baseboards. Jeremy, her husband, is not static. She thinks of him as made out of the same stuff as an India rubber ball. Yesterday he dug all day, flies stuck to his sweat. She was mad at him because she knew there was nothing wrong with the tank. The drains in the house were slow for a whole other reason, but try to tell him that. She did not let him know she was mad, since it wouldn't have done any good. This is something she has mastered. In fact, she fried steak and onions and mushrooms and bought him a six-pack of Blue Star. She can get on the Fleetline and buy grass seed herself.

She scratches sorrel out of packed dirt with a spoon, having meant to buy a trowel all her life, and waits for Royenne to come on the school bus. She doesn't want to go in the house, where *Reader's Digests* and *Heralds* lie undisturbed in the magazine rack waiting to murder her with their old darkness. Sometimes she pretends Royenne is her own child.

"The second thing is," says Moses, "people who won't fall in love—and there are lots of them—never fall into real life." There are times when Moses is not clairvoyant. Times when he tries, but misses. This time he's on her wavelength.

He has Leona thinking while she puts another load in the too-small washer, pries fillets apart for tonight, and gets ooze out of the crack between the toilet and the floor where Jeremy was fooling around with the system yesterday. It's better than what Jeremy gave her to think about before breakfast, which was twenty minutes of why his compressor is better than other people's. You can't go by horsepower, it's all in the number of the CFM, and his compressor has an unloader that makes the motor idle instead of going on and off, which is the beauty of it. "People buy these dinky ones at Canadian Tire," he laughed, "because they don't know." Sitting with her tea under the dogberry tree Leona does not think about her husband's compressor, she thinks about falling into real life.

"You know what I'd love to have?"

She loves the way Moses gathers all her attention and gives her all his.

"What?"

"A good pair of sandals like yours."

Leona got her sandals at Zellers on the wino end of Water Street. They look like Birkenstocks. "They aren't really that good."

"I know they're not the first-rate version, but they'll last you the summer. Six weeks."

She laughs with no one but Moses. Hazel is all information on saving your own seeds and how to kill slugs. Hazel cuts slugs in half with scissors. Mona talks about her husband's colostomy. The bag can fall off in his sleep. Jeremy leans out his truck window talking to Doug, both with their engines running, about how they have each fixed rot in a barn, how virtu-

ally impossible it is to do, but how they have managed to do it. Leona asks Moses, "Do they let you go to town alone?"

"Probably more than they let you. I only need a letter from the doctor."

While Jeremy reads the sports section, she says, "Tomorrow I might take Moses to town for some sandals."

"Are you allowed?"

"They don't own him."

"Who's paying for the sandals?"

"He is." Which she's sure is not true. She'll have to get the bus fares too, and a couple of hamburger platters. "Can you pick up Royenne and give her a snack?"

"What do you want me to give her?"

"Cheez Whiz crackers and milk. Dianne picks her up at quarter to five." Dianne paid Leona on Friday, which is why she has money for Moses.

Sitting on the bus with Moses she wonders is she his keeper or his company. The driver says hi as if she and Moses get on his bus together all the time. Surely the driver would say if he thought something dangerous was happening. Someone would run down from the home and stop them. She should have called Denise. Moses' body heats her right arm.

On the road she thinks how hard this place must be to decipher if you come from somewhere else. She knows the board on the lawn across from Sobeys says Woodfords' Sawmill, but for three years the paint has been so worn not one letter is legible. Other signs have letters blown off: can ilk 99; iced olog $2.99. She's glad she is not a Russian immigrant.

St. John's thrills her. There are stone walls and beds of hyacinth. Moses says, "I know what you mean," though she hasn't said anything. He won't get out by the malls, but stays on till downtown, from where the route carries on to broken, unnamed places. She is heartened by his confidence. With a hand in his pocket and his coattails flying—just like at the home where no one has coattails but him—he walks past Atlantic Place and the Scotia tower and up stairs to Duckworth where geraniums peep through railings. He says, "No need to get off in an industrial park," and she wonders if he conspires like this with everybody. She sure doesn't. Little parachutes from dandelions float past people's heads like an invasion of unnoticed aliens. He takes her to see Hans who has a perpetual yard sale in the starling alley between the cathedral and Turk's Head Pub. Moses encourages Leona to buy a fifty-cent cake plate. He says she can eat her afternoon ladyfingers off it. Alma shows them how a church elm has sucked her well dry, its roots a frantic interlacing around the bottom of the hole. Alma scores the bark each night with her potato knife. Tonight she'll cut the

section that will kill the tree. Leona likes to think of the tree stealing all that water while appearing motionless. She can't tell who Alma is, or if Moses knows her. It is three o'clock and she is starving.

Moses fits in. She is the one out of tune. His cobbler is a real cobbler. A gold stiletto slipper advertises in-store dyeing, and behind a wall of sneaker whitener and skate laces are the fairytale lasts and thick-set sewing machines used by shoemaker elves. The Greek proprietor greets Moses as an old-world friend, nods at Leona more hesitant; she has Zellers written all over her. He measures Moses' foot as lovingly as one of Jesus' disciples, and she notices Moses can make elegant conversation with anyone, not just herself, and feels sad and left behind. She wants to ask if the store has a pair of red shoes. For twenty dollars, Moses is to come back in an hour and a half, and his sandals will be ready. Moses is the one who asks about red shoes for Leona, and the owner shows her a little pair that would have fit her when she was six.

"Why don't you buy them," Moses says in a quiet voice whose vibration she feels where wings would be. "Just for the..." He says just for the *something* of it, she can't pick out what: joy? memory? She feels his breath on her ear. He whispers but with his voice on the whisper, and she wants to chew his lips. So what if he had all his teeth pulled out last year? She realizes she can't tell if he is older than her, or younger.

She'll have eighteen dollars left if she pays for his sandals. Hands in his pocket, he leads her out, sniffs easily to the cobbler, "I'll take care of it when I come back."

They walk past the coltsfoot-infested ravelled edge between the town and the sea, and she thinks, *this is where all this is leading,* but he doesn't stop here. She wants him to stop here, in the zone of Export A packs and rusted radiators and the town's industrial heap of salt for the roads. Later, instead of dirt and beer bottle glass in the grass, there will be ships' lights and darkness. This is the territory she imagines he inhabited before he came to the home. She has trouble following his strides up the Battery to a pink house. Except for the Fisher Price swing set, the house is like her mother's. A scrap of scalped turf, pleated lampshades in the window, volumes of sheer curtains with a valance. When Moses opens the door Leona smells warm Alphaghetti and hot electronic innards of a new television. "It's my sister," he whispers. "I might babysit for an hour. You want to come in or see you later or what?" Does his sister let him babysit her children?

Maybe Denise was wrong about Moses' parents. Maybe she said *tried* to kill them, not killed them. Leona walks down Signal Hill and gets a medium from the chip wagon outside Atlantic Place. She wishes Moses could have some too while she eats out of her grease-spotted brown bag crusted

with salt, the malt vinegar fumes joining the seaweed and sewage smells.

She wonders how young his sister's children are, what will happen if she herself shows up back home without him. What she'd like to know is, does he go to his sister's all the time, or just this time? Is Leona heaping responsibility on herself unnecessarily? Her mother's satin bathrobes stand before her: pink, blue, mint-green. How would a Supreme Court judge figure it out before and after the murder of the children? She finds a pay phone and calls the home. Charlene is working, not Denise. Charlene is younger. Leona can't tell her what Denise said about Moses, it might get Denise in trouble. So she hints around. Is it OK that she's brought him to town for sandals? Yes my dear, that should be fine. Is it OK that he went into his sister's house for a while? Oh yes, cheerful, an ill-paid worker getting an unscheduled smoke break. The sister might have gone out for a while and left him with her children. This is so unimportant the worker is silent, waiting to hear the rest.

"I mean, is it OK to leave Moses alone with young children?"

Charlene thinks about it.

What is going through Charlene's mind? "Charlene?"

"Yes?"

"Did Denise ever say anything that would lead you to think Moses shouldn't babysit small kids by himself?"

"Like what?"

"Do you know her phone number?"

"We're not allowed to give out the wardens' home numbers."

"Could you call her for me? Call her and just ask her what I asked you, and I'll call you back."

"She went down the bay to visit her father."

Leona can't remember whether she and Moses agreed to meet at the shoe store or by the salt mound. She thinks of the grass seed and walks way down Water Street West past Zellers and Stan's Tavern and the Salvation Army to the side street where Gaze Seed is. She loves the smell of fertilizer and bulbs. They have small paper bags of Kentucky blue grass seed done up with staples right on the counter, lots of them, as if everyone in town has been talking to Moses and wants just enough for the patch over their septics. She looks at the fish in aquariums at the back for a while. On the way back she browses in Afterwords and buys three old Victoria magazines that have pretty things in them for Royenne to cut out, then walks down to look at the Russian names on the boats, and men soldering in the cavern of a trawler, the molten sparks flying close to her hair. A rat steals across some planks and a police car slows as it passes behind her, and she figures she might as well go get the shoes. The shoemaker hands her Moses' sandals, which smell strongly of new-cut leather, and the red shoes,

all unwrapped, as if he wants her to be able to enjoy them as she carries them out on the street. He won't take her money because he says Moses said he'd take care of it. She wants to ask him how well he knows Moses, but she doesn't. She takes the shoes and her magazines, the straps and pages and bag of grass seed slipping around in her arms, to the crumbled edge below Moses' sister's place.

When she gets near the salt heap, she sees Moses slide down the bank with his arm around a cake pan. She can see the top half of his sister's Honda in the driveway. The pan is full of Rice Krispie squares covered in waxed paper. She expects Moses to sit on a rock and haul slabs out of the pan for his lunch, but he doesn't. He hands her the pan. The squares have been precisely cut, she can see the thin sharp rectangles through the wax paper, and he says here, bring them home to your husband. Jeremy loves Rice Krispie squares and she never makes them. She can't get her mind around the idea of melting great big marshmallows in a pan without burning them. "You have to use miniature marshmallows," Moses tells her, and they walk and he pays the shoe man with money his sister gave him, and they get the Fleetline home.

Blaise Moritz

The Tic-Tac-Toe-Playing Chicken

Had the tic-tac-toe-playing chicken sold out?
I remember her at the winter's fair, plying an honest trade,
a dollar in appreciation for her talent or training
to try a fingered "O" against her pecked "X"
and, having studied the sport, marvelled at her mastery
of position, the power of the corners as opposed
to the illusory value of controlling the centre—
hers was no cat's game! Could this be her, come to the strip
where the LED display in suspenseful bursts barks:
"Win $100,000
Playing Tic-Tac-Toe
With a Live Chicken!"
A *live* chicken. Today we must suspect audio-animatronics
or computer-generated imaging in all advertisements of the marvellous.

High above the seafood buffet, I surveyed the strip
from the Rio's fifty-first floor Voodoo Lounge,
Vegas a network of lights from mountain to mountain
except for the bright range along the boulevard
where, like buttes, the hotel towers erupt from the plane
of service alleys and low sheds, a typology immediately evident:
the original single slabs, the second-generation long-armed crosses,
the contemporary triads,
the older hotels smooth as if over time their former stylings
have been worn away such that only the youngest facades
maintain some crowning detail, classical or Byzantine or Enlightenment
ornaments which must gradually erode
until the city is visible without flourish.

Everywhere repetition: thousands of near-identical chambers
for the once and future honeymooners, the transient high-rollers,
for the new family gaggles in search of another sterile playworld—
could Vegas succeed in being all things to all people? Romantic, slutty,
wholesome,
the unlikely resolutions of the pin-up girl, or cheerleader in city form?
Dozens of near-identical halls for the slots and gaming tables,
everywhere mirror images, in the layout of hotels, of streets, everywhere
repetition, in structure, but also in content, except for that one cage,
which held the singular tic-tac-toe-playing-chicken.

Down on Freemont, now belittled, the old Vegas,
at the home of the world's most liberal twenty-one
watching the pushing and the splitting and the doubling down,
at one dollar per long neck drinking away the interval
until everyone will rush out to the pedestrian mall that's been made
of the former mean street for the next show:
video projected up on the canopy spanning the old clubs—
anything to draw back the crowds that have forsaken the world class
topless girls,
the reality of their breasts for the ersatz world uptown:
New York, New York, Paris, Venice, even Seattle,
the unsexy monumentality of it all!

Dancing up there on that faux sky like new and malformed constellations,
bulbous and featureless figures, wearing vests and cowboy hats,
computer-generated production numbers to hits as ephemeral in substance
as they are indestructible in abstract; the mouthless dancers sang:
"I've got friends in low places."
My face is there in the crowd, somewhere in a digital photograph
taken by one of the party lying flat on his back
to capture the freak show above our heads.
The flash and then back to the tables, settled
in all likelihood for the dawn, all tentative
movements toward the chicken languidly deflected by a skeptical
challenge:
what if the chickens are put to bed at some point?
They can't have the chickens out twenty-four, seven!
And what if like the lions at the MGM Grand
there is a bedtime and, instead of arriving
as I did once at the lion habitat
just before ten, when the cats disappear into their inner chambers,
to find them restively playful, clawing at their plastic tree,
eager to be off-duty and thus never more dutifully showman-like,
we were to arrive a little late, having interrupted sure and present
diversions,
at some unpeopled nook within the casino at the Tropicana,
finding only a large board, darkened, and an empty cage, draped,
where earlier there must have been "X"s and "O"s electrically illuminated
and that especial chicken of mysterious genius, plotting its next move.

Robert Nazarene

Richwoods

He left on his bicycle, eleven
years old. A good boy,
who followed the rules,
never talked back, tended
to his chores, minded
his manners.

When night fell, he hadn't
returned. His mother said:
he was afraid of the dark.
In the poorest county
in the state, the sheriff
was summoned,

the Highway Patrol, reporters,
a *Command Post,* the F.B.I.
For five days & nights: blood-
hounds, neighbours
on horseback, the helicopters.
Rugged terrain:

strip mines, gravel pits, the Ozarks'
tangled spine.
Forget Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry
Finn, Andy Hardy. This
is the *new* American Epic,
a story without any ending.

In the glare of klieg lights,
his mother's face,
a ruddy map: of terror,
bewilderment. That look
of all hope: *lost.*
It was *there*

that I saw him: in her mind's eye,
riding his bicycle
beside the *Meramec's* swirling
current, over the logging
roads' mangled maze, beneath
the thickets strangled

with rain—never once:
out of sight.

Harald Hartung
translated from the German by Chris Michalski

from Where the Ants Land

I

The bamboo rustles at sunrise
Yesterday the flying ants ascended
as if obeying orders
                The globe shimmered
in the window
            America already seemed
a bit jaundiced
                Just a little push
and America tumbled into the shade and fell asleep
Now Asia stares at me
                floating over the
Pacific and Australia so far below
Is it snowing down there? And where will the ants
land?
        My eyes don't work as well as they used to

II

Afterwards we were still standing there
(after Budweiser
& Eliot & Beckmann) with binoculars
on the street and our hosts
bent on showing us Eliot's birthplace—
which I'd already been to—
they figured now I definitely
had to catch the comet!
But I'd
seen that yesterday from the hotel
with my own two eyes, that is with my glasses
had
already praised the endless tail and yes we
would see each other again before Hale-Bopp's return

IV

Dirty green
The leaves curl themselves up
All through the summer the troops kept
advancing
later the long retreat
In the hospital the curtains are drawn
Beer is trickling down the drinkers' brows
The blackbird keeps its eyes fixed on me and goes on
pecking in the shadows for worms
I am
a harmless giant as far as it's concerned and
may now stand up for peaceful steps
Moratorium which has nothing to do with *mors*

Bryan Wade

Crossing the Rio Grande

"La frontera" was the unanimous choice of the judges for the UBC Residency Prize in Stage Play in 2003 because of its profound theatricality and design concept. Roberto and Maria, the two central characters, cross and re-cross the Rio Grande at many different stages in their lives. Sometimes it is no more than a stagnant wading pool infested with garbage and human waste; at others, it is a raging river, dangerous to cross.

Of course, the Rio Grande provides a significant symbol that supports the play's central theme: except for the people of the First Nations, we are all immigrants in North America; some of us just came sooner than the others. Illegal immigrants like Roberto (and his mother and father) cross the Rio Grande at their own risk in the hope of having a "better life" in the United States, while Maria's parents crossed the border years before and are now an established upper middle class Hispanic family.

The Rio Grande is also a symbol of the personal thresholds we, as individuals, have to "cross" to become adults. Roberto repeatedly "crosses" the Rio Grande as he escapes from his juvenile detention centre (and later prison) trying to find answers for his life. Later in the play, Roberto and Maria face a significant dilemma together as they stand by the river: will crossing once more lead to tragedy?

"La frontera" is a moving, lyrical, elliptical play full of genuine tenderness, violence, and laughter. I am delighted that PRISM *international* is publishing it. Enjoy.

Bryan Wade
Director of the UBC Residency Prize in Stage Play
Creative Writing Program

La frontera

a play by
Michael McGuire

Tú solo y yo quedamos.
Prepara to esqueleto para el aire.
Yo solo y tú quedamos.

de "Ruina"
un poema de Federico García Lorca

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CHARACTERS

ROBERTO: Nineteen, though he ages as he completes his education behind bars; Mexican, a young man of significant ability and winning ways. It is difficult not to love him. His English is nearly perfect, though with an accent.

MARIA: Twenty in Act I, over thirty in Act II, a U.S. resident, a highly successful student in an established *Mexicanoamericano* family. She speaks perfect English, perfect Spanish.

MAMA: ROBERTO'S mother, mid-thirties and unaging, attractive, uncertain health, uncertain English.

PAPA: ROBERTO'S father, forties and unaging, bilingual at a pragmatic level.

Masks assumed by MAMA and PAPA:

MARIA: An older woman, she wears the painted mask of *una mujer de la calle.*

MARTINEZ/KELLY: The man in uniform. First it is MARTINEZ, an Hispanic border guard; then KELLY, a very white white man, past middle age, a youth detention centre administrator. Both wear masks of authority. Both speak Spanish as well as English.

MAMA & PAPA: MARIA'S parents, an established family in *los Estados Unidos.*

EL TRAFICANTE: A dealer smuggling *armas de fuegos* across the border to the south.

SETTING

An empty stage which is sometimes a youth detention center, PAPA'S shack or the home of MARIA'S parents, but, more usually, a hot dry unpopulated stretch of the Mexico/New Mexico border. The river is low, an unhealthy looking trickle; shreds of plastic and old containers remain stuck in a leafless bush, a reminder of high water. Plastic also blows along the sand. When the wind picks up, the feel of it, as well as the sound, is harsh. Eyes are not fully opened then, heads tend to be held at a downward angle; one steps closer in order to be heard or speaks downwind, except at night when moonlight and stillness bring a magic of their own. The sun also oppresses.

N.B. River death scenes may be choreographed.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Michael McGuire was born in Chicago and attended Todd School in Woodstock, Illinois, where Orson Welles was also a student. Some say McGuire learned his craft from his uncle, William Anthony McGuire, who once had three plays on Broadway at the same time, though other critics dispute that view. Michael McGuire's plays have been produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Mark Taper Forum, amongst others. A collection of his plays, *Plays by Michael McGuire*, was published in 1999 by Broadway Play Publishing. *The Scott Fitzgerald Play* was published by University of Missouri Press. McGuire also writes fiction. His stories have appeared in *The Paris Review, Hudson Review* and *New Directions in Prose & Poetry.* A collection of his fiction, *The Ice Forest,* published by Marlboro Press and distributed by Northwestern Press, was named one of "the best books of 1991" by *Publisher's Weekly.* Lately, McGuire's attention has turned to la frontera between the United States and Mexico; he has written several plays and novels on the subject. "La frontera" is one of those plays.

ACT I

Scene 1

The first night. The Mexican side of the river. Dusk, a slowly fading light. ROBERTO *and his mother stand at river's edge. They wear old clothes; they have one cardboard suitcase secured with string. They watch the river; they watch the light. The remains of a cheap meal lie at their feet. The wind will drop as the light fails, but at first they must brace themselves against the gusts.*

MAMA: *¡Qué viento! (the wind drops, she looks down at the water) El agua es oscura, sucia... (lowering her head to listen to it trickle) ¡Escucha! Creo que ríe.*

ROBERTO: English, Mama.

MAMA: It is laughing. The river is laughing at us. *(looking across) No quiero ir.*

ROBERTO: English.

MAMA: I don't want to go.

ROBERTO: I know, but we...

MAMA: *(looking across, with distaste) ¡Río Grande...!* I don't see anything so grand about it.

ROBERTO: They have simply taken our water, Mama. If they let it go...

MAMA: Can they? *¡Qué potencia!* Can they just... *(slowly opening her hand)* "let it go?"

ROBERTO: I don't know, Mama. If they let it go, it would be even harder to get across. *(to himself) Imposible.*

MAMA: They leave us the scum, the dregs, *los restos,* the remains. Look at *el río,* what is left of it! *¡Químicos!*

They turn from a gust of wind, then MAMA *faces* ROBERTO.

MAMA: Do you think we can find your father?

ROBERTO: *¿Cómo no?* He wrote us, didn't he?

MAMA: That was so long ago, I can hardly remember.

ROBERTO: I remember. He wrote in English. He told us where he was.

MAMA: Your father was never any good at directions. He knew where he was born, he knew his way to work.

ROBERTO: He found you, didn't he?

MAMA: I lived next door. If he didn't have me to tell him where he was, he'd have never found his way home. *(worrying)* And we are going to be a surprise, *una sorpresa!* If he'd invited us, if he was going to meet us... *¿Tenemos que ir?* Do we have to go?

ROBERTO: We have to.

MAMA: We are leaving everything.

ROBERTO: We are going to everything. *La oportunidad.*

MAMA: *¡La oportunidad!* Do you really need me? I could wait here. I...

ROBERTO: We must be there. Or nowhere. All of us. They cannot break us in two, *nuestra familia, Mamá.*

MAMA: No.

A gust of wind pushes them apart. MAMA *speaks from a distance, anxiously.*

MAMA: Is it dark enough?

ROBERTO: Soon.

MAMA: What if I fall? What will I look like? I'll be ugly. I'll stink. *(raising her arms in ghostly fashion)* I'll rise from the river...*un fantasma, un espectro...*

ROBERTO: *(laughing)* No. You're beautiful. *(using an English expression)* You'll always "come up roses."

MAMA: *(laughing, then no longer laughing)* I wasn't made for this.

ROBERTO: *(gallantly)* What were you made for, Mama?

MAMA: *No para nadar,* not for swimming in the sewer like a corpse.

ROBERTO: No, of course not. *(reminding her of her dream)* But for *una casa magnífica, las noches importantes...*

MAMA: *Sí, las noches importantes.* English, Roberto. Robert.

ROBERTO: *(teasingly)* Rob.

MAMA: *(with distaste, emphasizing the nickname)* Rob...! Doesn't that mean "to steal?" *(teasing)* Are you a thief, Roberto?

ROBERTO: Why should I steal when I have been given so much? Tell me about it, Mama. Tell me your dream.

MAMA: Well...

The wind rises again, but MAMA, *dreaming her dream, physically transformed, raises her voice to speak over it.*

MAMA: Yes, a fine house, with a courtyard, a fountain, a hundred-year-old tree...

ROBERTO *crosses the distance between them to take her hands.*

ROBERTO: And the sculptures, Mama, don't forget the sculptures; and inside, the paintings; the piano, black and shining; and...

The wind drops altogether.

MAMA: *(freeing her hands)* Shh.

They listen. A heavy four-wheel-drive vehicle is heard on the American side of the river. ROBERTO *and his mother scurry backwards on all fours into the bush.*

MAMA: *Espuma.* Scum. *Escoria.* Dregs. *Hombres espumosos.* Uniformed men, government men keeping the poor from the rich...

ROBERTO: Be still, Mama.

Distant headlights play over the branches above them as the sound of the engine is amplified by the cut of the riverbank, then fades as ROBERTO *and his mother crawl out of the bush.* MAMA, *her clothes dirtied, her spirit anguished, brushes herself as* ROBERTO *looks up and down the river. He begins to lead her into the water.*

ROBERTO: Now, Mama. *Ahora.*

MAMA: *(holding back, still brushing herself)* Now? No, I can't, Roberto. A moment ago, maybe. But now... Look at me. I look awful.

ROBERTO: No one's going to see you. Now.

MAMA: *(allowing herself to be led)* I'm scared, Roberto. I'm going to drown.

ROBERTO: No you're not. I won't let you. I promise. *Palabra de honor, yo te...*

They disappear downstage, MAMA *stepping gingerly into the trickle of water, looking behind her as the light fades.*

MAMA: *(her voice fading, resigned) Moriré,* Roberto. I'm a dead woman...

ROBERTO: *Yo te protegeré, Mamá. Vivirás, Mamá,* you will live...

Scene 2

The second night. PAPA's *shack.* PAPA *sits, a printed form, a pencil in hand.*

PAPA: *¿Cuántos años?* "Years of experience in present position." *(laughs to himself)* What position is that: on my knees, hands out like some sculpture in front of a bank? How many years? *(enters a number, then under his breath) Quinientos años. Mil millones.* For as long as the poor get poorer. "Proof of right to work in this country. Documents you are able to produce."

ROBERTO *appears, watching* PAPA *as the latter crumples the form. Though it is only a day later,* ROBERTO *is changed. His clothes have obviously dried on him. He himself is dehydrated and hardly capable of speech at first.* PAPA *becomes aware of him before* ROBERTO *attempts to make his presence known, and wheels towards him. A moment passes as they face each other.* PAPA *does not recognize him.*

PAPA: *¿Quién es?*

ROBERTO, *head back, opening his mouth, only gurgles.* PAPA, *after a moment, understanding the situation, hands him his own can of beer, which* ROBERTO *drains.*

PAPA: *¿Tienes sed, muchacho?*

ROBERTO: English, Papa. Yes, I'm thirsty. But in America we speak English.

PAPA: Roberto! How did you get here? Never mind. I can see. The same way I did. Where's your mother? Home?

ROBERTO: We got separated.

PAPA: Where?

ROBERTO: At the river.

PAPA: *¡El río!*

ROBERTO: After the river. We got across. I know we did, both of us. A patrol had just passed, but it came back. We hid. Separately. They spotted me. I ran. They couldn't run like me. They didn't shoot. I got away. I hid.

PAPA: And your mother?

ROBERTO: They didn't see her. I watched them drive off. She wasn't in the car.

PAPA: You went back.

ROBERTO: I went back. I looked. I called. I went back across the river. I crossed again, this way. I waited for the sun. She wasn't anywhere.

PAPA: When was that?

ROBERTO: This morning. I waited all day. I went up the river and down the river.

PAPA: The river be damned. Fuck the river.

ROBERTO: It is only water, Papa. Or the lack of it.

PAPA: *Continúe, muchacho. Recuente.*

ROBERTO: I found high ground. I have good eyes, Papa. At first light, before the sun was high, I looked slowly all around. *(his voice nearly breaking)* ...no one...

Suddenly ROBERTO *covers his face. After a moment* PAPA *leads him to his one chair and seats him.*

ROBERTO: You didn't know me?

PAPA: It's been a long time.

ROBERTO: Five years, Papa. Still...

PAPA *hands another beer and a taco to* ROBERTO.

PAPA: You'll eat. You'll drink. We'll go back.

ROBERTO: To the river?

PAPA: To the stinking river. Where else?

ROBERTO: *(standing)* We'll find her, won't we, Papa?

PAPA: *¿Cómo no, muchacho?* As we have eyes to see...

PAPA *takes his jacket. He stands with a sweater for* ROBERTO *in his hand, patiently watching him eat as the light fades.*

Scene 3

The third night. MAMA *huddles by the river, which is now upstage behind her, running with the sound of a soft intermittent chuckle. Her old clothes have dried on her, she is sick from drinking the river water. She is on the American side underneath a bush that is similar to the one on the Mexican side.*

MAMA: *...malo, enfermo...* River, you have made me sick and you laugh, you chuckle. You have separated me from *mi hijo, mi esposo...* River, what is left of you, you carry nightmares, not dreams. If you had your strength, you would carry dead horses, dead children. *Mi hijo, mi hijo: ¿dónde estás...?*

The sound of tires slowly rolling in gravel is heard: a vehicle moving with its engine off.

MAMA: Now, river, now what have you brought me?

MAMA *is suddenly illuminated in the beam of a flashlight.* She *looks up to see the man in uniform,* MARTINEZ, *masked, a nightmare version of a border guard, looking down at her.*

MARTINEZ: All alone, Mama?

MAMA: *(standing weakly)* No, I am not alone. There is my son, my husband, his father before him and his father's father before that.

MARTINEZ: *(shining the flashlight all around)* I don't see anyone. Lying pretty low, aren't they?

MAMA: Very low, their faces in the sand, in the river.

MARTINEZ: You're on the wrong side of that, aren't you?

MAMA: I no longer know which side I'm on; I no longer know if I made it across or if I'm still out there...in the middle.

MARTINEZ: You made it one way anyway. This time.

MAMA *lowers herself to the ground.* MARTINEZ *switches off the light, crouches beside her, speaks gently.*

MARTINEZ: What's wrong, Mama? Sick?

MAMA: Only a little.

MARTINEZ: You shouldn't drink the river.

MAMA: I know that now.

MARTINEZ: The river is poison. It's dead.

MAMA: Yes, you killed it.

MARTINEZ: Someone did. *Las maquiladoras,* maybe. It wasn't me. *(standing)* Now. Do you want to splash back or be trucked back?

MAMA: I'll walk, I'll... *(seeking the English)* I'll "wade."

MARTINEZ: Okay. Get yourself going. Home, Mama. It's less trouble that way for both of us. *(he waits)* Go on now.

MAMA *curls weakly on the sand.*

MARTINEZ: What's your name?

MAMA: I have no name.

MARTINEZ: You don't need one. You're just another.

MAMA: *(softly to herself)* ....another Maria...

MARTINEZ: What?

MAMA: Maria. That's my name, if I haven't heard it in a

while. I'm Mama to my son.

MARTINEZ: Isn't every mother? Go now, or I'll have to take you in. Go on. If I catch you or your son or your husband or his father's father, it's—who knows? Maybe bang-bang-bang! The end. As you said, face down in the river. You understand that, Mama? *(switching on his flashlight, shining it on her)* Now! *Ahora. En este momento.*

MAMA: *(standing as the wind returns) Sí.* I am gone. I disappear. We all disappear. *Me fui.* Like that. *(leaving) Nos fuimos.* We are gone.

MAMA *makes her way uncertainly towards the river. She disappears, wavering, into the night.* MARTINEZ *watches a moment.*

MARTINEZ: *(to himself) Jesús, ¡qué trabajo!*

MARTINEZ *leaves the way he came. The wind drops. After a moment, his vehicle is heard starting up and driving off.* ROBERTO *and* PAPA *enter cautiously.*

PAPA: Are you sure?

ROBERTO: I'm sure.

PAPA: How do you know?

ROBERTO: I know. *(pointing across the river as the wind, fitfully, thinks of returning)* See that bush. It is just like this one...only on the other side. That is how I know where I am, where we are.

PAPA: *(trying to see across the river)* I see nothing, nothing but darkness.

ROBERTO: I see it easily. It's a line from there to here.

PAPA: And from here to there. Do you think she went back?

ROBERTO: I don't know.

PAPA: Let's continue on this side. *Habla, Roberto.* So she doesn't let us walk right by her. Talk. Don't make me do all the talking.

ROBERTO: *Sí, Papá. No, Papá.*

They begin to leave, opposite to the way they came, ROBERTO *keeping up a low stream of conversation.*

ROBERTO: I thought of baseball first, Papa.

Exit PAPA.

ROBERTO: That's one way, I thought. It is, isn't it, Papa, one way across the river? *Béisbol, beisbolero...*

Exit ROBERTO, *following* PAPA. *The wind moves down the river a moment before* MAMA *returns. Wavering more than before, she is keeping an eye open in the direction the border guard left. She is sicker now and drops to the ground to vomit, though there is nothing in her stomach.*

MAMA: *(holding her head, feverishly) Río, río, lleno de caballos muertos, de niños muertos...*

MAMA *looks up. Mexican music reverberates from a car interior. Dreamlike, it comes from this side of the river, then the other.* MAMA *stares into the darkness one way, then the other, and shakes her head. The music fades. She lowers her face into her hands. Enter* KELLY, *masked, his uniform a nightmare version of a warden's, heavy with handcuffs, keys; his face the very white face of a very white man, heavy with authority. At first he whispers to her.*

KELLY: *Sirena, nereida... (raising his voice slightly)* Oh, goddess of the dead water and the plastic bags...

MAMA: *(looking up)* Are you speaking to me?

KELLY: *(normally)* Who else? How you doin', Mama?

MAMA: Who are you?

KELLY: You know me. I'm Kelly the fisherman, *el pescador, el pescador de almas perdidas.* I catch 'em, I lock 'em up, I

throw the key away.

MAMA: Who do you lock up, Mr. Kelly?

KELLY: You know. The kids, *los niños.* Some I save, some I lose, of course. But what about you, Mama: lost any lately?

MAMA: My son.

KELLY: Only a son? Why some mothers...

MAMA: What are you...? Why are you here?

KELLY: Same reason you are, Mama. Lookin' for the one that got away, fishin' a dead river on a dead night under a dead moon...talkin' to a dead woman...though you'd make a hell of a bait.

MAMA: I am no bait, *el pescador.* I'm old..."washed...up." *(looking at herself)* Something is not right.

KELLY: I don't mean that kind of bait, Mama. *(sitting cross-legged on the ground)* I mean homemade tortillas, a warm lap, a place to lay a tired head. That's what they need, Mama, these boys. They're tired, bone tired at nineteen, sick of trying, sick of being tough.

MAMA: *Pobres niños.*

KELLY: That's right. *Pobres niños.* Let me tell you about this one, mama. He's gifted, he's got talent. In all my years locking kids up, I never met anyone like him. He doesn't belong on the lam.

MAMA: On the what?

KELLY: Thought you spoke English, Mama. If you don't speak English, you're on the wrong side of the *Río* and you certainly won't appreciate it when I tell you how this impressionable *niño* was sent "up the river," and the wonderful *oportunidad* he found there. No, this mother's son wasn't like the others, not to begin with.

MAMA: *(suspiciously)* Why are you looking for him?

KELLY: To give him another chance, Mama. You've got to believe me.

MAMA: What's his name?

KELLY: Roberto, of course.

MAMA: Why "of course"?

KELLY: They're all Robertos. This one just happened to be, uh, well, like a son to me. *Como un hijo.* You, uh, wouldn't happen to have seen a Roberto around here?

MAMA: Me? No. I haven't seen a Roberto for years.

KELLY: You expect me to believe that? I know what'll make you come up with a Roberto. We just have to jar your memory a little, little mother, *madrecita.* Now this wetback...

MAMA: Roberto is no wetback.

KELLY: Sure he is. Robertos are. We all are, for that matter. This is a nation of wetbacks, Mama. Of Robertos. Some of us crossed a river; some, an ocean. *Roberrrto...* You can tell by his name; he's one of the former, *Roberto del Río,* a young man of the river. *(doing the dead man's float)* Can't you just see him rising, sinking out there, white eyed, arms spread, dripping bags and bottles....

MAMA: *(covering her eyes) ¡Aiyee...!*

KELLY: Knock it off. Back to the real world, Mama. Isn't it a shame the river is such a stinking dribble of a creek?

MAMA: *(uncovering her eyes) Ah, sí, tú conoces el río,* what is left of it. Perhaps you too are crossing, re-crossing, back and forth, back and.... *(standing weakly, proudly facing it)* You see, river, here I am. I made it across you again, didn't I?

KELLY: Now, Mama. Who you foolin'? Never mind Roberto.

Look at the river, into it. *¿Te miras?* See yourself? You're right out there in the goddamn middle and everybody knows it. Even the river knows it. I wouldn't call it vanity. But you've changed, Mama, since you got your feet wet, since your toes tested the quicksand. You're not old or "washed up," but something is not right.

MAMA: Yes, I feel it. I'm changing, I'm...

KELLY: A stinking corpse. I can smell you from here.

MAMA: *Perdóneme.* I've been sick.

KELLY: *Excusas, disculpas, pretextos.* As I said, a tumbling, bloated, stinking-sky-high corpse, a wide-eyed body, forever asking something of a cold dawn, of a flushed and empty sky.

MAMA: The river...

KELLY: Never mind the river, Mama. You think we've got all night? To begin at the beginning. What do we see at the beginning: some lousy trickle which is, even I'll admit, wider, deeper than life? Hell, no. Walls. Prison walls. Yes, this is where it all began, Mama. On the inside. In.

MAMA: In prison?

KELLY: *(leaving)* Just open those eyes, Mama, those eyes you're always covering. See it? What would you call it, if not a prison...?

Exit KELLY. MAMA *opens her eyes wide. For a moment there is only the wind, which dies as* MAMA *speaks.*

MAMA: Roberto... I don't care what you've done or where they put you or how you got away. You are my son. You can always come to me. Come home, Roberto. Come...

MAMA, *eyes wide, in the shadows, remains visible only to us. Reenter* ROBERTO.

ROBERTO: *(looking behind him, then pointing across the river)* Here we are again. See, Papa. There is the bush that is just like this one.

PAPA: *(entering)* Never mind the bush, Roberto. You know I can't see the damn thing. *(quietly to himself) ...¡Oh, mi Dios...! (suddenly calling out in the darkness, his voice near to breaking)* Maria...!

ROBERTO: Papa, they'll hear us.

PAPA: *(despairing)* What does it matter? *(himself again)* No they won't, border guards haven't got such good ears. Roberto.

ROBERTO: Papa.

PAPA: You go on, the way we're going, look for another bush like that one you see across the river. Maybe there's another just like it on that side, maybe you...

ROBERTO: I don't think so, Papa...

PAPA: Just do it. I'll go back, the way we came here now, this time. I'll go about an hour. You go about an hour. Then we'll turn, we'll return, right here, to this spot...in about two hours.

ROBERTO: Papa, you know you'll get lost, you'll wander off. You have no sense of...

PAPA: I'll be back, putting one foot in front of the other. I'll follow the river. *No puedo nadar*. I cannot swim. I'll be back.

ROBERTO: Papa...

PAPA: *¡Vaya! ¡Camine!*

ROBERTO: *Sí, Papá.*

Exit PAPA *and* ROBERTO *in opposite directions. The wind blows down an empty river.* MAMA, *uncovering her eyes, is once more in the light, listening to the beat of the car radio, the distant mariachis off. Enter* KELLY.

KELLY: So, Mama? What'd ya see? Prison walls?

MAMA: Something smaller, not so bad, with grass by the fence.

KELLY: Ah, you must have seen "Corrections," *la casa de criminalidad juvenil,* or something like that. That's got a bit of grass, as if a little grass is going to keep them from becoming three-time losers, lifers. What do you think, Mama? You think that was it?

MAMA: I...guess so.

KELLY: Of course it was. Let me fill you in. You think this is the night you ran back across the river, the night you didn't make it, but it isn't. Years have passed. You're a memory, Mama, a ghost in a young man's mind. And our very real Roberto, our gifted young Roberto, who fancies sculptures in his mama's garden, pictures in her house, *música de piano* in the background, yes our delicate, sensitive Roberto who is not at all like the others, is busy stealing a car, *un coche.* Well, "borrowing" one.

MAMA: Roberto would never "borrow" a car, would he?

KELLY: Don't ask me, Mama. Hang on: here comes the background: *el fondo, los antecedentes, los porqués y los cómos.* The next thing we know, Roberto, he's in prison. Why? Because he makes some *gringo* family love him. Sound familiar? They take him in, they send him to school, he steals their car. Bang-bang-bang. And they turn him in. Bang! Why? Because he breaks their hearts once too often, but that's too long a story. Anyway, here we are, in prison, behind the walls—"incarcerated": You know that one, Mama?—up the river, in short...and in prison the warden recognizes Roberto.

MAMA: Does the warden know Roberto?

KELLY: *Paciencia, Mamá.* No, Mama, the warden, a man who isn't getting any younger, recognizes Roberto as a young man of taste, his mama's son, one who has no business stealing cars, maybe the young man the warden would have been if he hadn't climbed into a uniform forty years ago. Anyway, he takes Roberto in, so to speak—it's his turn, after *la familia gringa*—gets him to finish school in prison, gets him out as early as the boy can be gotten out. And Roberto, what does he do then?

MAMA: Roberto goes on to great things, that's why we came to America, that's why we "splashed" across the river.

KELLY: Why Mama, get your story straight. You must be talking about some other Roberto. This one, our Roberto, he goes wrong. *Sale mal—¿comprendes?* He breaks into a house, steals a television or something equally worthless, gets caught, gets sent back *y etcétera.* You see, Mama, he broke the warden's heart, like he'd broken the heart of the *familia gringa* that took him in, like he broke his mama's heart, I'll bet.

MAMA: He hasn't broken mine. Mine isn't broken. I still love him.

KELLY: Sure, you do, Mama, sure you do. Maybe the *familia* does too; maybe, even, the warden does. But Roberto broke their hearts, every one of them... *(softly, insidiously, his eyes narrowing elsewhere)* ...just like he broke Maria's...

MAMA: Maria's. Who's Maria?

KELLY: *¡Qué va, Mamá!* You always knew there was going to be a Maria, didn't you? Didn't you know that in your unbroken heart?

MAMA: I suppose I did. Even if my name, too, was once Maria.

KELLY: Was it? *¡Qué interesante!* Though it hardly matters. You're all Marias, just like the boys are all Robertos. But this is the new Maria, the young Maria, Maria Two, the one that counts in the end. And, if you want to know what happens next, you're just going to have to see the movie. God, I love the movies! Yes, you're going to have to pay your twenty-five cents and sit there in the popcorn shit and the Pepsi shit with the rest of them. When you get over your river sickness, that is, Mama, when you recover from drinking the river shit... *(moving off)* ...when you're no longer right out there in the middle in the one stinking spot you can get in over your head, and bask and bathe forever, more or less, that sinkhole you know so well...that you discovered for yourself years, years ago when Roberto and Papa were looking up and down the river until they couldn't even find each other.

MAMA: Wait! *¡Espera! (feeling in her dress)* Here. *Pago. Tengo un peso nuevo, un peso. (offering it)* Take. Is that enough? Can I see your movie? *Quiero ir al cine.* I want to see my Roberto.

KELLY: Your Roberto, Mama...or the new face, Roberto-Roberto, the wetback with a thousand faces?

MAMA: *(hanging her head)* ...your Roberto, Roberto-Roberto, the...wetback...

KELLY: *(laughing, not taking the proffered peso, backing away)* Ha! Gotcha! Sorry, Mama, I was just pulling your leg. That picture hasn't been made, may never be. Honestly, we're still at the casting phase. That's why we've got to find him. You've got to help me. If you want to see Roberto, or whoever we get to play Roberto, I guess you'll just have to be in the movie yourself. What do you think of that, thirty-plus? Ever dream that in the twistings and turnings of your wildest river dreams?

MAMA *weakly runs her fingers through her hair.*

MAMA: Well, I...

KELLY: Don't worry, you've still got it. Believe me, I know. Quick, Mama: you wanna play Maria, Maria Two, the Maria that counts in the end?

MAMA: *(preening a little without rising from the sand)* Maria? Well... I've still got it, you say?

KELLY: That's what I say.

MAMA: *(standing uncertainly)* No, I don't think I... *(suddenly vamping it, one hand on her hip, muy mexicana)* And what exactly is "eet," *señor?*

KELLY: *(laughing)* There. I think you know, *señora,* I think *tu sabes muy bien* what "eet" is. However, *lo siento mucho,* but...we are not holding auditions today, the next cattle call is next week, when the drought ends, when the banks are green with something other than river scum, the air heavy with harvest, with abundance. Sure, Mama, for that audition, we'll meet in the shade of a hundred-year-old tree...

At the mention of the tree, MAMA *is suddenly helpless, older, sicker, looking around her and seeing nothing but a riverbank, the blowing plastic bags.*

KELLY: What's wrong, Mama? Feeling a little lost?

MAMA: *(every bit the the lady) No yo, señor.* I know exactly where I am.

KELLY: Of course you do. Right out there in the middle, in everybody's favourite sinkhole, in the one place you can get in over your head. Is that it?

MAMA: *(with dignity)* That's it.

KELLY: Now feeling a little lost is only natural. You know most of making a movie is just standing around waiting for them to set up the shot. So. You stand around and we set up the shot. Got it?

MAMA: Got it.

KELLY: Good. You see, I am not entirely without pity. We'll make another try at that youth detention centre, okay?

MAMA: Okay.

KELLY: Think of the grass, Mama, just think of that spot of grass that keeps a couple of mischievous kids from becoming three-time losers, lifers, felons.

Exit KELLY. MAMA, *standing around star fashion, attempts to light a cigarette. As she inhales, her sickness returns and as she sinks to the ground, gagging, she fades from sight.*

Scene 4

MAMA *is gone. The stage is transformed from riverbank to prison.* ROBERTO, *in prison garb, somewhat older though still just out of boyhood, but very clean and well pressed, stands alone.*

ROBERTO: I don't know why I am the way I am. I want so much...and sometimes I am so close to putting my hands on it, to building Mama's house around that hundred-year-old tree, to making the sculptures for her garden... Then something happens. *Salgo mal.* I go wrong. There can't be such a thing as fate, can there? Not in our time. Not in *los Estados Unidos.*

KELLY *appears holding* ROBERTO'S *history. He looks up from the folder, affecting an accent.*

KELLY: *¡Aiyeee, Roberto!*

ROBERTO: *(at attention, eyes straight ahead)* Mr. Kelly.

KELLY: Back again, Roberto?

ROBERTO: Looks that way, Mr. Kelly.

KELLY: *(looking at the folder)* You're breaking my heart, Roberto. You know that.

ROBERTO: I know that, Mr. Kelly.

KELLY: *(reading)* "Breaking and entering." And for a goddamn lousy television. Was that worth throwing away a high school equivalency? Was that worth a second offence?

ROBERTO: No, sir.

KELLY: So, why did you do it, Roberto? Let's hear it from the dead horse's mouth.

ROBERTO: I... It is a long story, Mr. Kelly. I cannot tell it by myself. I think I need Maria by my side.

KELLY: Maria? Who the hell's Maria? I thought you went—bang—from the river to losing your mother, from—bang—losing your father, to being taken in by a decent family of Anglo Saxon Protestants, from—bang—stealing their car, to jail, to my helping you, to your dragging yourself—or being dragged—back, back behind the walls. Bang—bang—bang!

ROBERTO: That's about it, Mr. Kelly.

KELLY: You know how you're going to end up, don't you?

ROBERTO: Yes, sir. Bang—bang—bang!

KELLY: That's right. That's bang on, Roberto.

ROBERTO: And it would be true too, sir, it would be fate...

KELLY: Fate? What the hell are you talking about?

ROBERTO: It would be fate, that is if it weren't for Maria.

KELLY: That's what I said before, Roberto. Who the hell's Maria?

ROBERTO: *(softly)* Maria is...Maria.

KELLY: *(with lascivious appreciation)* Ah! Well! Why didn't you say so? So where can we get a little look at this number?

ROBERTO: In the game room, Mr. Kelly. In the movie, on the television.

KELLY: *(expansively)* In the movie! On the television!

ROBERTO: If the guys will just be quiet.

KELLY: *(strolling off with* ROBERTO*)* Oh, well, I'm sure they will, Roberto, once they understand the situation. After all, a living breathing Maria... In a movie! On the television! The boys don't see that every day.

ROBERTO: No, sir.

Exit KELLY *and* ROBERTO, *as the light changes to the white light of the television, the unbearable sound level of the game room, the echoes of young men imprisoned. After a couple of catcalls, the watching men fall silent and the light changes to street light, to* MARIA—*yes, it's* MAMA, *wearing the painted mask of the street corner, though her dried river attire remains unchanged—on the curb. She looks this way, that way, hoping for business. Enter* PAPA, *down on his luck, who walks right by* MARIA, *the crumpled want ads (los anuncios clasificados) in his hands.* MARIA *calls softly after him.*

MARIA: Hey, sailor.

PAPA: *(stopping, half amused)* Sailor? That's how much you know, *señorita*. I never even saw the sea.

MARIA: How about a deep river then? Never seen a deep river, sailor?

PAPA: Not that I remember. Just a stinking shallow thing.

MARIA: *(advancing)* That will have to do. What's that in your hand, sailor?

PAPA: *Los anuncios clasificados, señorita,* the want ads.

MARIA: Ah, and can such an old sailor still read the "teeny preent" of *los anuncios clasificados?*

PAPA: Such an old sailor has no choice, *señorita.*

MARIA: And why has such an old sailor who has no choice but to read the "teeny preent" made such a crumpled mess of his *anuncios clasificados?*

PAPA: Because, *señorita,* there is nothing here for me. This old sailor has no luck.

MARIA: No luck, *viejo?* There is no such thing as no luck. Perhaps even an old sailor will get lucky with me.

PAPA: I am afraid he cannot afford your kind of luck, *señorita.*

MARIA: Now, if the old sailor... Hold it, Maria, that's a hell of a mouthful. Papa... Do you mind if I call you Papa?

PAPA: No, it's all right.

MARIA: Papa, you can come with me for nothing. You can stay with me tonight, watching your luck turn on the ceiling while the *camiones,* the big trucks, rumble past. In the morning we will take our *café* together, our humble *desayuno... (pointing off)* ...in that hole in the wall, that greasy spoon, right there. And then you will be gone, a little better rested, a little luckier... And no poorer than before.

PAPA: And, in return, what can I, an old sailor who has never seen the sea, who crawled up the banks of some stinking river a thousand years ago, do for the *señorita?*

MARIA: *(taking his arm, walking her walk)* The truth is, Papa, I have lost somebody; I am looking for somebody.

PAPA: And you want to pretend I'm him?

MARIA: No, Papa, not exactly. You see, he is very young, hardly more than a boy, though he has taken *mi corazón,* my heart, and broken in.

PAPA: As I said, you want to pretend...

MARIA: No, Papa. He is my son. You will help me find him.

PAPA: But how can I...?

MARIA: Shh, Papa. *(displaying her forearms)* I know it somewhere in these bones bathed by the river, these bones lying so white in the sun.

PAPA: *(feeling her)* And such lovely bones they are, *señorita.*

MARIA: Yes, that is right, feel my bones, the bones of my body, my body's bones, my body: think only of it now as it thinks only of you.

PAPA: *Señorita,* you are a temptation. Can I tell you a secret, *señorita?*

MARIA: Tell me, Papa.

PAPA: Somehow, as unlucky as I am, in this wide world, I have stumbled across you, and you... *(after looking around him)* You are just my type.

MARIA: *(laughing)* Why of course I am.

PAPA: But...

MARIA: But...?

PAPA: But what shall I call you, *señorita?* Such gentleness of spirit, such a perfect match deserves a name.

MARIA: Tonight you will rest, tonight you will sleep as you have never slept before, and perhaps, if your luck continues, you will wake up with a fresh uncrumpled paper in your hands, a paper full of opportunities *clasificados,* the one that's right for you already underlined. *(leading him off, her arms around him)* Come Papa, come sailor. Tonight you can call me Maria.

PAPA: *(kissing her as they leave)* Maria...it's as if...as if you've been waiting for me...

MARIA: I have, Papa, I have.

Exit PAPA *and* MARIA. *The white light of the television bathes the stage, the sound level of the game room returns with its attendant calls of obscene appreciation. Silence returns as the light changes to that of* KELLY'S *office. Enter* ROBERTO *and* KELLY *opposite.*

KELLY: So what's all that supposed to mean? Where do you come in?

ROBERTO: Sooner than you think, old man. This is my story.

KELLY: Ah, yes. I can see that now. Your story. But what about this Maria character? As I said: who the hell's Maria?

ROBERTO: This way, sir. To the riverbank.

KELLY: To the...? You won't try to slip away in the shadows?

ROBERTO: Not me, sir. I'm a model prisoner, a student. I wouldn't leave without...without finishing my education.

KELLY: I seem to remember you went over the wall with your high school equivalency. That was pretty dumb, wasn't it?

ROBERTO: It was. I see that now. I would never escape without my degree in accounting.

KELLY: I should hope not.

ROBERTO: *(as they stroll off)* Someone has to account for Mama and Papa, Mr. Kelly, for Maria and Roberto. Someone has to keep track.

KELLY: That's right, kid. Adding...subtracting...

ROBERTO *and* KELLY *stroll off.* MARIA *appears where* MAMA *was last seen, on the American side, the river upstage of her in the shadows, her* "MARIA" *mask in her hand. It is a still night, clear and windless. First* KELLY'S *car radio, then* KELLY'S *living voice is heard.*

KELLY: *Sirena, nereida... (entering, raising his voice slightly)* Oh, goddess of the dead water and the plastic bags...

MAMA: *(looking up)* Is that you, Mr. Kelly?

KELLY: *(normally)* Who else? How you doin', Mama?

MAMA: *Así así.* I've been better.

KELLY: Well, you were first class in that scene, Mama. Seems you can "handle it," as we say. *(leaving)* Now if you can just "hold tight" while Papa washes himself and we set up the next shot...

MAMA: "Hold tight?" I guess I can do that.

KELLY: *(off)* Remember, Mama: you're Maria.

MAMA: I'll remember.

Enter PAPA, *walking slowly down to wash himself in the river. He squats, facing upstage in the shadow.* MAMA, *replacing her* "MARIA" *mask, approaches* PAPA *and stands with her hand on his head.*

MARIA: What do you think, Papa? Was it worth it?

PAPA: *(washing himself)* Was what worth it, Maria?

MARIA: Perhaps I should say "eet, eet." Was "eet" worth such a long walk along this steenking treeckle, *el agua oscura, sucia... (lowering her head to listen to the river trickle)* Listen. I hear the river laughing. *El río que ríe.* Do you hear it? Do you think it's laughing at us?

PAPA: *(washing)* I wouldn't know, *señorita.*

MARIA: Tell me, Papa: was I worth it?

PAPA: Huh?

MARIA: Don't tell me you've already forgotten?

PAPA: Forgotten what? Like the river I forget everything. *(washing himself)* Fucking river. You I leave, to you I return. You wouldn't believe this, *señorita.* I lost someone very special here.

MARIA: *(softly)* Did you, Papa?

PAPA: Very, very special. *(suddenly looking up, piteously)* What's wrong, *señorita?* No matter how much I wash, I can't get myself clean.

MARIA: *(harshly)* It doesn't matter, sailor. I like you dirty. *(raising him, pulling his pants up)* Come now. Now we sleep. *(softening)* In the morning we shall have such *café* as you have never tasted. Come. They are just planting the beans.

PAPA: *(again allowing himself to be led)* Why, that's just the way I like my coffee, Maria, made slow like that, made real slow.

MARIA: I like it when you call me Maria, sailor. Come now. Up the bank. There, we're headed right over there. Under that bush, *una casa grande* of plastic bags. Our *refugio.* It's warm now, tomorrow it will be cool. Tonight it's home.

PAPA: *(his face in her neck, seeing nothing)* Home. If my son had had a home like this he would have never left, would he?

MARIA: Never.

Exit MARIA *and* PAPA. *The moon shines on an empty river.* ROBERTO *and* KELLY *appear opposite.* KELLY *is walking the younger man up and down.*

KELLY: *¡Qué aventura! ¡Qué romanticismo!* You can sure tell a tale, Rob. You've got talent. Imagination. If only it were true...

ROBERTO: But it...

KELLY: Listen, kid. You've got the smarts, you know it. I don't know what goes wrong when you get out there. But it's not going to go wrong in here, not on my watch. You finished high school, now you're deep into your Associate's. You can't get out of here with an AA and

break in some fucking window for an old TV. Can you? Well, could you?

ROBERTO: *(facing him)* Don't you want to hear about Maria, Mr. Kelly? I was telling you about Maria.

KELLY: I thought you just told me.

ROBERTO: That's only half the story. There's the other half, the other Maria.

KELLY: The other Maria? They're all Marias, son. *(beat)* All right, Rob, tell me the other half.

Scene 5

The clear night on the river is replaced by city lights, MARIA *working her street corner as before, looking both ways. Only this time* ROBERTO *walks directly into the scene while* KELLY, *perhaps eventually lighting his cigarette, watches. The moment* ROBERTO *enters the scene, he loses all memory of* MARIA. ROBERTO, *like* PAPA, *walks right by her.*

MARIA: Hey *niño!* Hey babyface! What's wrong with me? Am I invisible? *(when* ROBERTO *doesn't stop,* MARIA *grabs him, swings him around)* Hey, look at me! Am I so bad?

ROBERTO: *(not facing her)* Not so bad.

MARIA: So what's wrong then? *¿No tienes un centavo?*

ROBERTO: It's not that.

MARIA: What is it then?

ROBERTO: It's just that, well, you're a little older than...

MARIA *smacks him.*

MARIA: Older and bolder, *muchacho.* Feel this. *(she places his hand on her breast)* Not so old, huh?

ROBERTO: *(returning to his gallant self)* Not so old, *señora.* This, anyway, must be just the right age.

MARIA: *(shunting his hand off)* That's right. Not so old, yet it holds all you'll ever know or need to know. Can you say no to it?

ROBERTO: I don't know, and yet...

MARIA: And yet, what? For you, *muchacho,* there is a special rate, one peso, *un peso nuevo* or, if you don't have it, *tu palabra de honor.* No charge for the embrace of my arms, for the scent of my hair tumbling over you, for the sleep that will make you a man.

ROBERTO: Why a special rate, why no charge? Why take my word of honour?

MARIA: I don't know. Your touch...so familiar, and yet so strange. I feel such warmth towards you. But, *por favor muchacho,* to business: you could help me. I am looking for...perhaps some friend of yours, a boy not so different now that I think of it...

ROBERTO: I'm not "Missing Persons," *señora.* Besides, *estoy ocupado,* I'm busy.

MARIA: Busy? What could be more important than sleeping that sleep of sleeps and, with just a little luck, the luck of our fathers say, waking up a man's man. *(her voice deepening in appreciation of the male) ¡Un hombre!* What's wrong with that?

ROBERTO: Nothing, *señora.* It's just that I...

MARIA: *(shaking him violently)* What? What? Tell me, stinking kid. What are you up to that's so much better than...

ROBERTO: All right! Stop shaking me! I'll tell you. Look at your watch. It's a quarter to twelve. Right? At twelve I'm going to break into a house.

MARIA: What for? You don't have to break into this house. You

can walk in the front door. I'm wide open.

ROBERTO: *(turning away)* No, it's something I must...

MARIA: *(pursuing)* Why? What for?

ROBERTO: *(turning on her)* To steal a *televisor, señora,* to steal a...!

MARIA: To steal a...! What do you want to steal a fucking television for? Everyone's got one. I've got one. I'll give you mine, you dumb kid. *(changing her tone)* It's colour. *Bailo...* I'll dance in its light for you. Would you like that?

ROBERTO: *(turning to go) Perdóneme.*

MARIA: *¡Espera!* Wait a minute. You think you're such a catch? I've left better than you gasping by the river, I've thrown better back. You think you're so good...

ROBERTO: Not so good. That's just it. At night the angels line the sky. They look down. They hold hands and whisper. They worry. They're looking for a saint to send to me, they're picking straws, they...

MARIA: *¡Qué palabrería! ¡Qué hablar por hablar!*

ROBERTO: I try to be a good boy, *señora,* but...

MARIA: Good boys don't steal televisions. Listen. Midnight's coming tomorrow too, isn't it?

ROBERTO: I guess it is.

MARIA: Come with me. Tonight. Tomorrow, midnight, *a medianoche,* you can steal your goddamn television. What the hell! I'll drive the getaway car. I've got a car too, you know, even if it is a little...

ROBERTO: A little old, *señora?*

MARIA: *(raising her hand in fun)* You'd better watch it, *muchacho.* Well?

Beat.

ROBERTO: Will you be very good to me?

MARIA: Better than anyone has ever been to you.

ROBERTO: Why better than anyone? Why?

MARIA: I don't know why. I feel like it. *(holding open her arms) Vienes, muchacho.* You are sick of being tough. You are tired, bone tired.

ROBERTO: *(revealing his fatigue)* How did you know?

MARIA: I know.

ROBERTO: Okay. I'll put off my television for one night.

MARIA: One night. *Muy Bien. Una noche,* one night of nights, coming up. *(leading him her way)* And tomorrow: a man's man.

ROBERTO: *(led)* A man's man...

MARIA: *Un hombre. (holding him close)* ...and tonight the sleep of sleeps. *¿Cómo te llamas, muchacho?*

ROBERTO: Roberto.

MARIA: Roberto? *¡Madre de Dios!* There are Robertos all over the place. Even the man in the uniform is looking for Roberto.

ROBERTO: What man in what uniform?

MARIA: I do not know his office or his name. *(gently in his ear)* I only know yours.

ROBERTO: *Sí, soy Roberto.* We are all Robertos. *Y tú señora,* what is your name?

MARIA: *Me llamo María.*

ROBERTO: Maria?

MARIA: *Sí.* We are all Marias.

ROBERTO *is looking at her intently.*

MARIA: What is it?

ROBERTO: When I am in your arms, Maria...

MARIA: *Sí...*

ROBERTO: *(gently touching her mask)* ...will you remove this?

MARIA: *(recoiling) ¡Aiyee, no!*

ROBERTO: *¿Por qué no?*

MARIA: *Tal vez. Con tiempo, Roberto. Mañana o pasado mañana...*

ROBERTO: In the light of my *televisor?*

MARIA: *(leading him off into a brightening moonlight) En la luz de tu televisor, la luz de la calle...la luz de memoria y de esperanza...*

MARIA *and* ROBERTO *wander in the direction of the river, her soft voice becoming softer as the river is heard softly laughing and MARIA'S arms tighten around* ROBERTO *protectively.*

Scene 6

KELLY *stands alone, cigarette in hand.*

KELLY: So that's how it was, that's how it all began. And then? One Maria turned into another, I suppose, but Roberto, Roberto remained the same. Roberto couldn't change. Of course not. After all, there is such a thing as fate, even in *los Estados Unidos*. And fate, some people's fate anyway, is: Maria!

KELLY *discards his cigarette and discreetly withdraws. The young* MARIA *enters opposite to stand beside the river. She is well dressed, contemporary, self-possessed and unafraid. A young woman with such bearing has no business strolling by such a putrid stream.* MARIA *tells her story in the darkness of the night. Gradually, her address becomes one to the audience.*

MARIA: *¿Por qué estoy aquí?* I walk here at night because there is never anyone here, and I can look back across the river. I came to this country as an infant. In my school nearly everyone was Mexican, but my father was ambitious, my mother was ambitious. I learned English well, I learned *la computadora*, I learned I was not like the others who remain on the other side, or even those who make it to this side but climb little higher than the bank, who splash home whenever, carrying whatever, before wading back once more, back to save again what little they can for the many they left behind. No, I am here to stay. *Estoy aquí para siempre*. I will never splash back. My life is here... though I do not have to work, I do not have to do anything. For love, I teach piano to the children.

ROBERTO *is heard waking up. The young* MARIA *steps into the shadows. Enter* ROBERTO, *who goes down to the water and squats to wash himself. Suddenly a bright moon is shining.* ROBERTO, *aware of* MARIA, *leaps up, closing his pants.*

ROBERTO: *¿Quién está?*

MARIA: Speak English, *muchacho*. You are in America.

ROBERTO: Yes, of course. Who are you?

MARIA Maria. I walk here at night. My house is not far away.

ROBERTO *looks back at the moonlit bush, which is now obviously empty.*

ROBERTO: Maria?

MARIA: What's wrong with Maria?

ROBERTO: Nothing. It is a common name.

MARIA: I am not common. And you? Who are you?

ROBERTO: Roberto, but...

MARIA: Do you always wash yourself in the river, Roberto?

ROBERTO: Always. Listen, Maria: *no soy muchacho*. I'm as old as you, older than I have ever been. I am a man.

MARIA: Yes, I can hear that now. You speak English very well, *hombre*. And yet...what are you doing on this side of the river?

ROBERTO: I live here. I work here. *(easing himself towards the bush to double check)* If you will excuse me, *señorita*.

MARIA: Are you leaving so soon?

ROBERTO: *(finding the bush empty)* No. You haven't seen anyone else on your moonlight stroll?

MARIA: No, there is never anyone here.

ROBERTO: Not even the bad ones, the *narcotraficantes*?

MARIA: No, it must be too far for them. Their legs are too weak. They need cars, trucks, planes. There is no one. That is why I come, that is why I am not afraid. You are the first I have ever seen. Why are you here? Where did you come from?

ROBERTO: I... I don't know.

MARIA: *(approaching)* You are not wet from the river, Roberto.

ROBERTO: No.

MARIA: But what is this, this number on your chest?

ROBERTO: I... The truth is, Maria... Can you keep a secret?

MARIA: Why not?

ROBERTO: It is my detention centre number. You see? My arms are cut. I cut them coming over the barbed wire.

MARIA: *(unfazed)* I thought you were going to tell me some river magic had brought us here at the same moment, that it was fated we should meet.

ROBERTO: *(bitterly)* Hah! There is little magic here. The river can make you disappear; it cannot bring you back. *(gently) Lo siento, María.* I know nothing of magic or fate. I only know I escaped.

MARIA: And why were you behind the *alambrada* in the first place, Roberto, behind the barbed wire?

ROBERTO: Illegal immigrant. Undocumented labourer. Wetback. You see, one day I saw a circus across the river. At night I swam over. I stole an elephant. I rode him to Los Angeles and then... *(when* MARIA *laughs)* No. *No es verdad.* It was the second time, for me, behind the *alambrada.* The first time was for a car I "borrowed," the car of the family that had taken me in, sheltered me. The second time it was a television. Then I was out, over the wire, and heading down the road with a little souvenir of my time in *los Estados Unidos.* You see, I was stopped by "Evidence" on the way out of the detention centre. I've been running all night, the television I stole years ago in my arms, and stumbling, tripping over the cord...

MARIA: *¡Qué cuento! ¡Qué ficción!* Such a tale you tell, *hombre! Es lo verdad esta vez?* Where's your television now?

ROBERTO: I threw it in the river.

MARIA: *¡Qué sacrificio!* And after carrying it so far.

ROBERTO: Not far enough.

MARIA: The river accepts all, doesn't it, Roberto? It refuses nothing, no one.

ROBERTO: No one.

MARIA: But you were going back? South of the border. And, if so, why didn't you hold onto your television?

ROBERTO: *Señorita...*

MARIA: Maria.

ROBERTO: Maria, yes, I was going back, with my *televisor...*

MARIA: English, Roberto, though *por supuesto,* of course I understand.

ROBERTO: English. Yes. I was crossing, splashing through the stinking dregs of a river, when I came to a spot which was deep, silent, dark and...and dirty. I don't know why, Maria, but I threw my television in, I watched it sink.

MARIA: And I don't know why...what is a television...? But that is such a sad story. Why is it so sad, Roberto?

ROBERTO: It is sad because I tell it sadly, Maria.

MARIA: And why...?

ROBERTO: This is where I first crossed coming this way, years ago. There was a patrol. My mother and I became separated. A little later, I found my father on this side—we were going to him—I found my father and we came back to look for my mother, but somehow...

MARIA: Yes.

ROBERTO: We became separated, my father and I. And now: the years have passed. I have heard nothing of him. We never found my mother.

MARIA: My poor Roberto. So why the car, the television? What silly stupid things. You were made for so much more...

ROBERTO: Do you think so? The car? I don't know why I took it. They had been good to me. Too good. I don't know why I took the television either. To sink with, I suppose, to hold in my arms as I sank. Well, it was nice meeting you, *señorita*, Maria. Perhaps we will meet again.

MARIA: Roberto, *espera.*

ROBERTO: What should I wait for: the sound of a jeep, the call of a man in uniform telling me to stop...?

MARIA: Would you... I know this is sudden—and silly...but would you like to come to my house? It is up to my parents, of course, but they are *mexicanoamericano.* I think they will understand.

ROBERTO: You do not disapprove of me, Maria?

MARIA: No. You need to be understood; I will try to understand.

ROBERTO: *(laughing)* Are you a saint? It would take a saint...

MARIA: *(laughing)* No. But my family is a good one. I like my parents very much. I think you will too.

ROBERTO: I'm sure I will.

MARIA: Will they take you in, hide you, shelter you? I don't know. But it is possible. Maybe my father will help you find work or... Have you been to school, Roberto?

ROBERTO: I have my high school equivalency. *(the bright moon fades behind a cloud cover)* When I went back to the detention centre the second time...

MARIA: ...and the last time, Roberto.

ROBERTO: I hope so. Anyway, Kelly—he's the warden—Kelly said if I'd finished high school the last time, I could finish college this time. Then I would be ashamed to steal cars and televisions. And so I began a course of study, accounting, but I became bored and....

MARIA: Kelly...befriended you.

ROBERTO: I guess you could say that.

MARIA: As I'm befriending you?

ROBERTO: You might say that.

MARIA: Then why aren't the warning lights going off? Why aren't there alarm bells in my head?

ROBERTO: I don't know. Maria. But...I don't know what I was thinking of. I can't come with you. I must cross before light. Cross and re-cross, back and forth. I don't know what I'm doing, what I'm looking for, but really, I am glad to have met you. *(gallantly)* The angels must have sent you to me, *señorita*, and I want to thank you for your kind offer. However, I cannot accept it. *(leaving towards the river)* Goodbye.

MARIA: *(very quietly)* Goodbye. *(more quietly) Adios, Roberto.*

MARIA *watches for a moment, then takes a sudden step after* ROBERTO.

MARIA: Roberto! *(he stops in* the *shadows)* Roberto, I meant what I said. You can come home with me. I think...I don't know why...I think my parents will embrace you. We have a lovely home, with a courtyard, a fountain, a hundred-year-old tree...

ROBERTO: A hundred-year-old tree?

MARIA: *Sí, un arbol* five times older than I am.

Beat.

ROBERTO: For now I must leave, *señorita*. Perhaps some day I will come back. I will find you...

MARIA: As you found your mother and your father?

ROBERTO *returns, removes a chain from his neck and hands it to* MARIA.

MARIA: *(accepting it)* What's this?

ROBERTO: It is a picture of my mother, not a photograph, but something I made in shop, in the detention centre. It is all I remember. And when she was gone, it was all I had.

MARIA: Why, thank you, Roberto. But don't you want to keep it?

ROBERTO *gestures "no".*

MARIA: Then I shall treasure it.

ROBERTO: *(leaving again)* Goodbye, Maria.

MARIA: Are you sure you want to put the river between us, Roberto? The river that can make you disappear, but cannot bring you back?

ROBERTO: *Lo siento, María.* I must go.

Exit ROBERTO *into the river shadows.* MARIA *stands a while looking after him then opens the locket and holds it up to the moonlight to see.*

MARIA: *Regalo, relicario...* Let us see. Why there is no one here, no one's mother. Only it is my house, my hundred-year-old tree! *(looking into the darkness over the river, she calls out)* Roberto...! *(and when there is no answer)* How can you know all this...? *(discarding the locket)* Get away from me with your river magic, your fated meetings in the moonlight. *(haughtily walking away)* You are beneath me.

After a few paces MARIA *hesitates, her hand on her heart; she returns, retrieves the locket and places it in her bosom. Again she turns from the river.*

MARIA: All right... If there is magic, let there be magic. If there is fate...

Suddenly in pain, holding her head, much as the elder MARIA *held hers,* MARIA *sinks to the ground.*

MARIA: But I don't believe in dreams, not even river dreams. I

don't... Let me go, river. You are laughing, I can hear you laughing...

What light there is fades to the sound of the river's laughter, which is transformed to the sound of a bubbling fountain in MARIA'S *dream.*

Scene 7
(Maria's Dream)

Lantern light, statues, the fountain, the sound of a distant piano and a child's laughter. Maria's MAMA *and* PAPA, *formally dressed for a more formal time and wearing the masks of proud parenthood, stand by the hundred-year-old tree.*

MAMA: You don't mind, do you Papa, that Maria's Roberto is not, well, of our class?

PAPA: What class is that, Mama?

MAMA: Why you know, Papa: the well-mannered, the well-read, the...

PAPA: When you said our class, Mama, I thought you meant the Class of '66, Low Life High, El Paso, Texas. But I saw in an instant you could hardly be referring to our fellow wall-gazers and gum-chewers. The other, on the other hand, means nothing. Class, if you ask me, class in the socio-economic sense...

MAMA: Hush, Papa. Look! Here she comes now. Did you ever see such a classy-looking daughter?

PAPA: *(looking off)* Never, never.

Enter the young, formally dressed and extraordinarily beautiful MARIA, *excitedly looking over her shoulder.*

MARIA: Mama. Here he comes now.

MAMA: Here he comes now, Papa.

PAPA: Here he comes now, Mama. My heart is going pitter pat, pitter pat. It isn't every day you marry off your only daughter.

Enter ROBERTO, *soaked and stinking from the river; a drowned man, his hair and nails unnaturally long. Though he is, at least, dressed for his wedding.*

MARIA: Oh, Roberto, I think I remembered you a little differently. When you wrote you would be coming, I remembered the Roberto I met by the river only last year, the Roberto of talent and promise.

ROBERTO: It was *el río*, Maria. I hope you will pardon me. I was wading toward you with flowers in my hand. Then *el río* reached up and grabbed me. I am sorry I look so terrible. I am sorry I smell so bad.

MAMA: It doesn't matter, Maria. You will bathe your *prometido*, your *novio*, your fiancé, bathe him and clothe him. You will put a fresh flower in his buttonhole. He will be *perfecto*...even before the band finds their way to the courtyard.

ROBERTO: *(bemused)* The band?

PAPA: We have hired a band, of course, Roberto. They've been singing underneath Maria's window from the moment you fell in the river.

ROBERTO: *(laughing)* I don't believe it.

PAPA: Believe it, Roberto. He for whom the *mariachis* sing *de una manera vivaz, animada*, so—shall we say "buoyantly?"—cannot be held down by a little thing like *el río*. He will make a fine son-in-law. We are proud to have you. *(shaking hands)* Welcome to the family.

MAMA: Welcome. Our dear Roberto. *(kissing him on the cheek)* Welcome.

ROBERTO: Thank you, Maria's father. Thank you, Maria's mother.

I shall do my best to be worthy of the love and trust you have placed in.... But, though I may hardly be in need of another baptism so soon after the last, did someone say something about a bath?

MARIA: Coming right up. Mama, will you please draw Roberto's bath?

MAMA: Of course, Maria. I shall sprinkle rosewater into it; I shall float petals on the surface.

ROBERTO: *(laughing)* It seems I'm going to "come up roses."

MAMA: *(looking hard at him)* Yes, that is an interesting English phrase, *¿no es?* Where did you pick it up?

ROBERTO: It seems I've always known it.

MAMA: Your mama didn't "come up roses," did she?

ROBERTO: As far as I know, the stinking river took her down and held her. I never saw her again.

MAMA: I am sorry I asked. I hope you will forgive me.

PAPA: Of course the young man will forgive you, Mama, though we should watch our tongues nevertheless. And your father, Roberto? Tell me, of a still night, when the moon tracks the river, does your father still wander vainly, hopelessly, a soul in torment?

ROBERTO: I believe he does. Some nights, when the moon is on his left, he thinks he is about to find my mother and he stumbles along, calling out "Maria, Maria..." with each last breath.

MAMA: "Maria, Maria..." Your mother's name was Maria? *¡Qué interesante!* It is also mine.

ROBERTO: Is it? *¡Qué interesante!*

PAPA: *¡Qué interesante!* And mine is Roberto.

ROBERTO: *¡Qué interesante!*

PAPA: But you were telling us about your father, Roberto.

ROBERTO: Yes, and some nights, when the moon is on his right, he thinks he is about to find me and he staggers along calling "Roberto, Roberto..."

MAMA: With each last breath.

PAPA: Hush, Mama, really. I wonder if we all listened, if we might hear him calling.

MARIA: Hush, Papa, really.

MAMA: Let us not inquire too closely, Papa. What does it matter if the river has taken Roberto's mother and father? If our son-in-law is good enough for Maria, then he's...

PAPA: Ladies of the house, my wife and my daughter, Roberto's betrothed, let us listen. Let us see if we can hear Roberto's father.

All stand facing in one direction. Nothing. All stand facing in the other. Indeed, ROBERTO'S *father is heard calling at an immense distance.*

THE DISTANT VOICE OF ROBERTO'S FATHER: Roberto...Roberto...!

PAPA: Sounds just like him, doesn't it?

ROBERTO: Does it? How so?

PAPA: I mean familiar. The voice is familiar. To me anyway. As if it were rising in my own throat.

MAMA: I'm sure he would be here if he could, Maria's father. Do you think he is heading this way, son of your father?

ROBERTO: Unlikely. If he hasn't found me yet, I doubt if he ever...You see, *el río* has him in its grip. But, Maria's mother, Maria's father, Maria...I seem to remember something about a bath...

MARIA: The bath! Roberto's bath! *(laughing happily)* Can you imagine? I forgot all about it...*(to* ROBERTO*)* ...a bath I've been waiting to give you all year. Quick, Mama! The roses, the rosewater!

MAMA: *(rushing off in slow motion)* I will dig the well and install the water pump; I will pump the water into the water tank and light a "teeny weeny" fire underneath...

PAPA: "Teeny weeny." How well Mama speaks *el inglés!*

Exit MAMA *making the sounds of softly simmering water, of large bubbles slowly rising.*

ROBERTO: *(slowly, if happily, tumbling in the currents of time)* That's what I like, Maria. That's just what I'm in the mood for: a long slow bath.

PAPA: I think you will be happy here, Roberto. We have three cars. There is no reason why we cannot have four. There is no reason for you ever to "borrow" a car, Roberto, for one of them, the best, better than mine, will be yours. There is a television in every room; it will hardly be necessary for you to run around with one in your arms. You will never miss *las noticias: las noticias locales, nacionales y internacionales*. Unlike my classmates at Low Life High, who never gave a "shit" about the world beyond their noses.

MARIA: Hush, Papa. Don't say shit. Roberto will think you *de clase baja*, that you have risen above your station. *(to* ROBERTO*)* Yes, you will always know what is going on, Roberto. *(opening, but not removing, the jacket of his tuxedo and his shirt)* Now we will just get you out of these wet clothes. What a lousy fit, Roberto! Did you rent these at Rent-a-Tux, El Paso? And for your own wedding! For shame!

ROBERTO: *(his good humour suddenly leaving him in a mournful howl)* Noooo...! Don't chill me, Maria...I got so cold in *el río*...I fell in the one place...it could take me down...I got out...as you can see...but not before I saw all kinds of things I never wanted to...a car, a

television...a man and woman, turning, turning in the current... *(normally, to* MARIA*)* In short, Maria, my intended, my betrothed, my future wife: the water must be hot.

MARIA: It shall be as you desire, Roberto. If it isn't hot enough, I shall warm it with my body. While the tub fills, I shall hold you in my arms and cover you with my hair. You will never be cold again, Roberto. You will never be bone tired. You will never have to pretend you are so much tougher than you are.

ROBERTO: Oh, my dear one, my beloved. How lucky I am, in all the swirls and eddies, the whirlpools of this life, to have found you.

PAPA: *(applauding as* MARIA *and* ROBERTO *are on the way out)* Bravo, Maria! Bravo, Roberto. That is the way. Something brings us together, we join, for a while the streams of our respective lives flow together, and together we are more, more than we ever were apart. Bathe him now, Maria, wash and trim his hair. Don't forget his nails. He looks like a dead man.

MAMA *looks in. Of course, there is the sound of running water offstage.*

MAMA: Oh, Papa, I hope he isn't.

PAPA: What's that, Mama?

MAMA: Dead. Maria will never forgive us if we married her to a dead man.

Exit MAMA *as* PAPA *turns to his wine cellar to withdraw a treasured bottle of sherry.*

PAPA: *(to himself)* That Mama, always thinking the worst.

MARIA: *(a mournful cry as she stands back from* ROBERTO *to better see him) ¡Muerto!* Dead!!! *(naturally, to herself)* Don't be silly, Maria. How could he be dead? *(signalling* ROBERTO *off) Vienes, muchacho.* Dead or not, we

will bring you back to life with our love, with our hot water, with our rose petals.

PAPA: *(looking back)* That's right, Maria. Soak those bones bathed by the river, bones that might so easily have been lying white in the sun...

MARIA; *(again signalling* ROBERTO*)* So white...

ROBERTO: *(following her)* So easily...

PAPA: That is my daughter heading down the longest hall in the house. That is my prospective son-in-law on her heels. This is me stepping into my wine cellar...

Exit MARIA *one way as* PAPA *steps into his wine cellar the other. For a moment,* ROBERTO, *alone and lost, tumbles in the current.*

ROBERTO: Maria...wait...

KELLY'S *car radio sounds faintly. Enter* KELLY *opposite just as* ROBERTO *is about to tumble off after* MARIA.

KELLY: *(clearing his throat)* Sorry to intrude upon the infamous bathing-of-the-future-husband scene, but...

ROBERTO: *(immediately restored to normality)* Mr. Kelly!

KELLY: Mr. Kelly indeed. I don't suppose you remember also running off in the middle of the Christmas play, leaving a couple of *Ave Marías* unsung, a couple of days and nights unserved at the detention centre...

ROBERTO: I remember.

KELLY: I'm glad you remember, Roberto. I remember. The judge remembers. The computer remembers. You must return with me. You must finish your *término*.

ROBERTO: My *término*... But...I'm so happy, Mr. Kelly. I am in love with Maria, with her family, with her house, with the ground we walk on and the sky above. It's more than I deserve, I know Maria is too good for me,

Maria is a saint, Mr. Kelly, but Maria has just consented to be my wife. She is about to bathe me in rosewater prepared by her mother. Her father is opening a sherry he has saved all his life for this occasion.

KELLY: I'm sorry, Roberto. My apologies to Maria, to Maria's mother and Maria's father. But, as you know: nothing matters. What matters is that I.... *(feelingly)* I welcomed you, you were going to follow your AA with a BA and then an MA and then, who knows? Most of the boys study law, of course, but the door was open, so to speak. You broke my heart, Roberto, do you realize that, climbing the barbed wire, running off into the night?

ROBERTO: *(hanging his head) Lo siento.*

KELLY: And now, thanks to your river magic, it will soon be your fate to *salir mal* all over again, to go wrong once more, to break Maria's heart, her mother's and her father's, as you broke your own mother's and father's, as you broke the heart of the *familia gringa* that took you in. This is the old story, Roberto. You are about to steal the blood red Mustang, the one with the white top that is sitting in the driveway, with tin cans tied to the bumper and a few words dribbled lovingly on it in rice: *Roberto y María, para siempre y siempre.* You will find the key in the pocket of your tux and you will slink off with it in your hand. You will only pause long enough to tear your own personal television from the wall, the one you were watching over your shoulder while you tied your black tie in the mirror, and drop it, your beloved *televisor,* in the trunk of your about-to-be-stolen, blood red Mustang. You are a thief, Roberto, a loser and a thief. You'd steal what is yours without the asking. I wouldn't be surprised if, on your wedding night, lying next to your young wife who lies so lovingly, so damply akimbo...

PAPA: *(off, a voice from the wine cellar)* Interesting word. "A-kim-bo." I wonder what it...

KELLY: Who's that?

ROBERTO: That's Maria's papa, Mr. Kelly. He's in his wine cellar choosing just the right bottle for our...

KELLY: May he mellow forever, may he season everlastingly, may he gather the dust of the ages for all your chance of consummating your nuptials...

An eddy causes ROBERTO *to tumble, arms outstretched.*

ROBERTO: *(in quiet horror)* ...oh no...no...don't say that... *(suddenly still, speaking normally, but without breaking his pose)* So what can I do?

KELLY: You can go back with me.

ROBERTO, *suddenly cold, shivers in torment and again begins to turn in the currents of time. There is the sound of a cork popping off; once more* PAPA'S *voice rises from the wine cellar, followed by* MARIA'S *voice, opposite, from somewhere down the longest hall in the house.*

PAPA: *(off)* 1966. Now there was a year.

MARIA: *(off)* Please, Mr. Kelly. Can't Roberto marry me first? I've heard of similar...

KELLY: *(raising his voice so* MARIA, *down the longest hall, can hear)* I'm sorry, my dear, but...

PAPA: *(off: A sniff, a swishing of his favourite vintage about his mouth and then...)* Perhaps Mr. Kelly would be interested in a couple of thousand acres, irrigated, knee-deep in alfalfa, his own herd of Brahma bulls with the hills behind them.

KELLY: *(raising his voice so he can be heard in the cellar)* Very tempting, Papa, but duty calls. *(detaching the handcuffs from his belt)* Roberto. But don't worry: in a few years you'll be back with another degree. Maria will wait. *(raising his voice)* Won't you Maria?

MARIA: *(far away)* Of course, Mr. Kelly. *(farther away)* I'll wait. *(farther)* I love Roberto...

Enter MAMA.

MAMA: Whew! Now that was a job. Seems I do all the work around here. Why hello, Mr. Kelly.

KELLY: Hello, Mama.

MAMA: I'm sorry. Roberto can't possibly come with you just yet. Roberto. Your bath is ready. Maria, off with his pants. You can't bathe your betrothed with his pants still on, his pants thick with mud, with weeds and plastic bags... *(observing* ROBERTO, *who continues to tumble in the current)* Just look at him: the long hair of his long-dead mother around his neck, the heartrending cries of his father still in his ears... *(commandingly)* Off with his...! *(realizes* MARIA *isn't there; leaves in search of her)* Now where has that girl got to? Who's going to take his pants off if you're not here? I'm certainly not going to be the...

Exit MAMA.

MAMA: *(off)* Maria...!

KELLY: *(raising his voice)* Keep looking, Mama. I'm sure she's just lost her way, wandering down the longest hall in your house. But, as I've often said... *(jingling the handcuffs)* ...nothing matters.

MAMA: *(off)* Nothing matters.

PAPA: *(off)* Nothing matters.

MARIA: *(off)* Nothing matters...

The light quickly fades as ROBERTO, *then* KELLY, *then* MAMA *and* MARIA *and, finally,* PAPA, *tumble by, arms and legs outstretched—all moaning open-mouthed, caught in the current of time.*

MAMA: ...there he is, Maria, get him, get him...

PAPA: *(a bottle in one hand, a glass in the other)* ...get him, Maria, get him...

MARIA: *(getting a hold of* ROBERTO'S *pants zipper)* ...hold still, damn you...how can I get your pants off...with you turning cartwheels...in the current...?

The current slowly tumbles all off, then MARIA *tumbles on and off happily,* ROBERTO'S *trousers in hand, followed by* ROBERTO, *alone, followed by* KELLY, *cleverly manipulating his own tumbling body, handcuffing the pantless* ROBERTO *and tumbling off with him. For a moment the stage is empty. Then the young* MARIA, *alone, reappears in the position she held at the end of the preceding scene, holding her head as the river's laugh returns and* MARIA *shakes the dream from her head to look around her at an empty riverbank. A wind rises fitfully.*

MARIA: But I don't believe in dreams. No, I don't. I don't. *¡Qué viento!*

The wind drops. MARIA *looks down at the river.*

MARIA: *El agua es oscura, sucia... (lowering her head to listen to it trickle) Escucha! El ríe de nuevo. Sí.* You are laughing again, laughing at us.

Enter MARTINEZ.

MARTINEZ: What's wrong, *señorita? Una pequeña pesadilla,* a little nightmare? *(when she doesn't answer)* Sick?

MARIA: Only a little.

MARTINEZ: You shouldn't drink the river.

MARIA: I know that now.

MARTINEZ: The river is poison. It's dead.

MARIA: Yes, you killed it.

MARTINEZ: Someone did. *Las maquiladoras,* maybe. It wasn't me. Now. Do you want to splash back or be trucked back?

MARIA: I'll walk, I'll... *(seeking the English)* I'll "wade."

MARTINEZ: Okay. Get yourself going. Go home. It's less trouble that way for both of us. *(he waits)* Go on now.

MARIA *curls weakly on the sand.*

MARTINEZ: What's your name?

MARIA: I have no name.

MARTINEZ: You don't need one. You're just another...

MARIA: *(softly to herself)* ...another Maria...

MARTINEZ: What?

MARIA: Maria. That's my name, if I haven't heard it in a while.

MARTINEZ: Go now, or I'll have to take you in. Go on. If I catch you again, maybe it's—who knows? Bang-bang-bang! Face-down in the river. The end. You understand that, Maria? *(switching on his flashlight, shining it on her)* Now! *Ahora. En este momento.*

MARIA: *(standing as the wind returns) Sí.* I am gone. I disappear. We all disappear. *Me fui.* Like that. *(leaving) Nos fuimos.* We are gone. *(mumbling to herself) Mi Dios, si los ángeles tienen ojos...*

Exit MARIA. MARTINEZ *stands, watching her go. He shakes his head.*

MARTINEZ: *Río Grande...* I don't see anything so grand about it. *¡Jesús, qué trabajo!* God, I hate this job. *(leaving)* If the angels had eyes...

Exit MARTINEZ *one way as* MARIA *appears upstage only to exit opposite him. For a moment only the river is heard.*

End of Act I

Act II

Scene 1

Nighttime. An unseen river of rhythmically rising and falling sounds. The bush. It is the young MARIA, *only several years older, perhaps in her thirties, who tumbles, arms outstretched, in the unseen currents of the river. She is not wearing the finery of her dream, or even the tasteful clothing of Act I. She is, in fact, shabbily, almost showily, dressed. She wears the painted mask of* "MARIA," *una mujer de la calle, and has a small knapsack on her back. Suddenly she stops and squats at the river to wash herself. Gradually, the river sounds subside and* MARIA *stands. She removes and drops the mask at her side. She stands looking across the water, her palms pressed together.*

MARIA: *Nuestro río que está en el cielo, da nos este día nuestra miseria cotidiana... El Río ríe una risa ahogada.*

MARIA *shakes its laughter from her head and ends her prayer.*

MARIA: No, I am no saint. I never was.

She removes ROBERTO'S *gift from her bosom and contemplates it.*

MARIA: *Regalo, relicario... (suddenly throwing it into the unseen water where it is silently swallowed)* Now, *primitivo río, pagano río...*take this from me, since you have already taken everything else, only, *si tú tienes un corazón,* a swollen fragment of a heart, allow me to see *mi amor, mi cariño,* one more time, even across you, even on your other side, remote, passing in the distance... behind me, after I am gone. *Pagano río, yo tú suplico...*

The river laughs again, its chuckle rising to nightmare proportions as MARIA, *covering her ears, turns away. When the silence of the night returns,* MARIA *suddenly addresses a spot in the night where she wishes* ROBERTO *would appear.*

MARIA: *(her hands moving on her stomach)* Roberto...*mi querido, mi caro...*come to me. I don't know how much longer I can wait. My desire is so strong. What desire? *El deseo. El deseo de crear más Marías y otros Robertos. Sí.* That they too might be separated, that

El Río might run between them too...*para siempre y siempre...amén*... No, river gods, nothing, no one?

She turns from that spot of darkness where ROBERTO *has not appeared, her hands suddenly empty. About to start, she sees her discarded mask.*

MARIA: *¿Hay que comer, no? (picking it up)* One must eat.

MARIA, *her mask in her hand, pulling up her dress, wades into the darkness in the direction of Mexico as* ROBERTO, *having escaped once more, appears on the bluff behind her, holding a piece of paper in his hand. Though she is nearly out of sight, seeing her dress in the shadows, he calls out.*

ROBERTO: Maria...

MARIA *stops, looks back at him a moment, then turns away to don her mask.*

MARIA: *(facing him, but remaining at a distance, her dress still raised) ¿Sí, señor? ¿Tú deseas alguna cosa?* Kiss-kiss, maybe.

ROBERTO: *(turning away)* I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else.

MARIA: *(approaching)* I can be anyone you like, *gringo*. A dead mother, a dream daughter, the wife who never was...

ROBERTO: No, no. I was looking... You haven't seen...?

MARIA: Someone so like me in the moonlight, only younger, no?

ROBERTO: No, well, *perdóneme*, but yes... Younger.

MARIA: *(raising her hand in jest to slap him, but lowering it)* Younger. Hmm, yes, I believe she was here, just a moment ago. I heard her praying to the river. Do you believe in the river gods, *gringo*?

ROBERTO: *No soy gringo. Soy Mexicano*. No, I don't believe in river gods. I believe in myself...and someone else. That is why I have come back. *Yo amo*...

MARIA: You love someone, *bracero? ¿Cómo, de larga distancia? ¿Por correo aéreo?* Did you write every day, Roberto? Did you call?

ROBERTO: Maria...?

MARIA: *(lowering her mask) Sí, María.*

ROBERTO: *(moving towards her)* Maria...!

MARIA: *(stopping him with a gesture)* You are too late, Roberto. I have thrown your *regalo*, your *relicario* in the river just to see you. Now my desire too is gone. *No estoy ardiendo. Mi vientre está vacante, desocupado. (turning back to the river)* I am crossing now.

ROBERTO: *¿Por qué?* There is nothing there. *(waving the rolled-up piece of paper in his hand)* See what I have first, Maria, before you go.

MARIA *hesitates, then wades back to stand quite near* ROBERTO, *her somewhat raised dress in one hand, her mask in the other.*

MARIA: For you I come back, Roberto, for you I will see what you have. No doubt that is our marriage licence in your hand.

ROBERTO: It is my BS.

MARIA: Bravo, Roberto. I am proud for you. You have a BS In what?

ROBERTO: Animal Husbandry.

MARIA: *(laughing)* As I said, Roberto, you are too late. Moments ago, if I'd known you had your degree, I would have lain with you right here in the sand and done whatever your books told us to, but now... I thought you were a student of accounting.

ROBERTO: I changed my major, Maria, for you.

MARIA: *¡Qué galantería!* And so *útil*, so very useful. You should

have had it five minutes ago, *graduado*. Or earlier, Roberto, years ago. You would have had me, instead of that old television, in your arms.

ROBERTO: *Lo siento, María.* We come bobbing up at the wrong time.

MARIA: Yes. *El río irónico* flows between us. Is it not ironic that now, when it is too late, you are a free man?

ROBERTO: Yes, I... Well...not exactly.

MARIA: Well, not exactly what?

ROBERTO: Not exactly free. It seems I was a better student than a prisoner.

MARIA: What do you...? *(stepping closer)* There is still a number on your chest, Roberto.

ROBERTO: Yes. I finished college faster than I could finish prison. There was a day or two to go, and I...

MARIA: You went over the wall.

ROBERTO: And you were about to go across the river.

MARIA *nods.*

ROBERTO: We are great leavers, great runners away, aren't we, Maria?

MARIA: You didn't used to speak like that, Roberto.

ROBERTO: I didn't always have a degree in Animal Husbandry, Maria.

MARIA: Well, so here we are, this is it, *la frontera*. What now?

ROBERTO: I was hoping we might marry, and live happily... *(and when she laughs)* If your stomach is as empty as you say, we might lie like brother and sister, our arms at our sides.

MARIA: When the river lets us go, Roberto, they will lay us out like that. *(turning toward the river)* I am leaving now.

ROBERTO: Wait! *(more calmly)* The patrols are nowhere near. Tell me about yourself, Maria. Your father...

MARIA: My father is dead, Roberto. My mother. My house is gone, sold to a *gringo* rancher who cut the branches from the hundred- year-old tree because its roots sought water, who shot the hawks and the skunks and the coyotes, who took five crops a year from the land until the water was gone, the earth's caverns dry as the river, dry as I...

ROBERTO: And the sculptures and the pictures, Maria?

MARIA: Were you ever in my house, Roberto?

ROBERTO: Never.

MARIA: Then how do you know there were sculptures and pictures?

ROBERTO: I just know.

MARIA: It was your mother's dream, wasn't it? *Una casa magnífica, las noches importantes...*

ROBERTO: *Ay, sí.*

MARIA: And Roberto, my students no longer come to learn the piano, because the piano, too, is...

ROBERTO: But what have you...how have you...? Why didn't you tell me?

MARIA: I didn't want to take away what little you had, your memory of me, a dream of my house. You were there.

ROBERTO: Of course. It was my dream too. But you didn't have to worry about me; you knew where I was. How have you survived?

MARIA: I shouldn't tell you. You will laugh, *como el río.*

ROBERTO: I won't laugh. I promise.

MARIA *walks away, taking stage, keeping her distance until later, when* ROBERTO, *deciding to go with her, takes her hand.*

MARIA: Can you picture me, *en la cocina* of some greasy spoon, some hole in the wall, making *menudo*, my hands in the tripe...?

ROBERTO: *¡Ay, no!* I cannot think of you Maria, on your feet, the grease in your hair...

MARIA: Then think of me on my back. Roberto. *(raising her dress fully)* I sold this.

ROBERTO: *(covering his eyes)* ...but why...?

MARIA: *(shrugging)* One day the role was offered; one day I took it.

ROBERTO: Life isn't a movie, Maria. How could...?

MARIA: *No sé.* It must be in the blood. I wore a mask. I was someone older, wiser. Have you never lain with a woman older, wiser, *una mujer de la calle?* Well? Roberto... *¡Responde!*

ROBERTO: Yes, I have lain with her.

MARIA: And did you stand up older, wiser?

ROBERTO: Older anyway.

MARIA: *Y un hombre.* And is that what did it, Roberto? Or was it the years staring out through *las barras* or carrying around those heavy books on cows and sheep?

ROBERTO: Don't mock me, Maria. We have both gone wrong. I stole and you...

MARIA: You cannot say it. Shall I say it for you? *Sí, tú robaste y*

yo vendí. You stole and I sold.

ROBERTO: It doesn't matter. Now, as you said, I am a man and you are a woman. We can go wherever we...

MARIA: *Sí. (moving off) Yo me voy.*

ROBERTO: Maria...!

MARIA: *Vienes conmigo, Roberto, dentro del desierto, la tierra sin vida, la tierra de sombra, la tierra muerta.*

ROBERTO: How could I? Am I some *campesino?*

MARIA: Come, Roberto. This is our ceremony, this is our marriage. Into the dirty water, across it.

ROBERTO: Then our "licence" is unnecessary.

ROBERTO *looks at his college degree, then discards it. It flutters into the river.*

MARIA: *(discarding her mask)* And I will not be needing this.

ROBERTO: *(approaching)* Across the river and into the sand...

MARIA: *(speaking with new hope)* Into the night, *mi querido,* our wedding night...!

The moment he takes her hand, they are lively, laughing. The moment they begin to walk into the river shadows, a bullet whizzes overhead. They freeze. KELLY'S *car radio is briefly heard as* KELLY *appears at a distance behind them, his gun untouched in his holster. They and he speak at the greatest possible distance.*

KELLY: I'm sorry to intrude upon the infamous wading-back-across-the-river scene, but you're breaking my heart, you know that?

ROBERTO: Your heart was meant to be broken, Kelly. You're an old woman.

KELLY: I thought I was an old man. I know I never had a son.

ROBERTO: You haven't got one now either.

KELLY: *(slowly approaching)* I wouldn't go over there. *(holding up his radio which crackles static and low Mexican laughter) La guardia de la frontera* are heading this way with slow smiles and empty pockets. Their eyes sweep the riverbank... *(pocketing his radio, smiling at* MARIA*)* ...their hands play with their zippers. *(he comes upon the bedraggled college degree)* But *ayieee, Roberto! (holding it up)* What's this?

ROBERTO: I appreciate all you've done for me, Kelly. *(leaving)* Goodbye.

KELLY: This is still your degree in Animal... What will you do?

ROBERTO: I'll walk along the horizon with a few sheep...

KELLY: And your AA in accounting...?

ROBERTO: I'll count them.

Exit ROBERTO *and* MARIA. *Beat.*

KELLY: *(softly, not to be heard)* Keep your heads down, kids. Some bullets fly lower than others.

Alone, KELLY *spreads the college degree on a rock to dry. Gradually, his address, as with* MARIA'S *in Act I, Scene 6, becomes one to the audience.*

KELLY: I never let one go. Spent my life locking 'em up. Only twice did I bend the rules. Twice I trusted this one; twice he broke my heart. The third time it was over the wall with his BS in his pocket...and only a week to go. Why? Can you answer that one? I could say I don't care. *(leaving)* But it wouldn't be true.

Exit KELLY.

Scene 2

The Mexican side. A chorus of distant dogs is heard starting up and dying away as MARIA *and* ROBERTO, *wet to the knees, wade south out of the darkness, coming towards us.*

MARIA: Is it still our wedding night, Roberto?

ROBERTO: *Sí.* And if, in this land, we survive, you will be mother of my children...

MARIA: *Madre de tus hijos...* But it is too late, Roberto. I think my eggs are rotting.

ROBERTO: I will bring them back to life.

MARIA: With love? With rose petals? You can say what you like about the rich and the poor, but my money's gone and you never had any. This is the beginning of the end, isn't it?

ROBERTO: *(again holding out his arms to her) No, mi querida.* Something will turn up. You'll see.

As she steps into his embrace, enter EL TRAFICANTE *from the north, to the sound of dogs somewhat closer than before. He has wet legs and a heavy burlap bag over his shoulder. For a moment he watches the two lovers embrace, then he lets his bag fall with a clank.*

ROBERTO: *(facing* EL TRAFICANTE*) ¿Quién está?*

EL TRAFICANTE: *Un hombre de negocios,* a businessman; a riverman, *un hombre del río* like you, Roberto, only with something else in my hands.

ROBERTO: How do you know my name?

EL TRAFICANTE: *¿Quién sabe?* It's always Roberto.

ROBERTO: Oh? *(noting* EL TRAFICANTE*'s wet legs)* You are heading south.

EL TRAFICANTE: *Sí, señor.*

ROBERTO: *¿Por qué?*

EL TRAFICANTE: South is a very nice direction, is it not? You have east to your left, west to your right and north right behind you. You cannot possibly get lost.

ROBERTO: Don't let us delay you. Fly south like the birds...

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, but *señor*, something holds me. There is another bag...over there, *en la otra ribera, la ribera norteamericana.*

ROBERTO: Why didn't you carry it with you?

EL TRAFICANTE: If I had carried them both, *señor*, the quicksand would have had me. *(making a helpless dog paddle in the air) No puedo nadar como un perro.* My bags are heavy.

ROBERTO: What is in your bags?

EL TRAFICANTE: *Nada, nada. Sólo mis armas de fuegos, automáticos,* handguns. I would not touch the *narcótico.* This business is good enough. I buy a gun for one hundred dollars and sell it for five hundred dollars. *¿Qué diversión, eh?* What could be more fun?

ROBERTO: And why should such an astute businessman, *un hombre de negocios*, go splashing in the night?

EL TRAFICANTE: Like you, *hombre*, strictly for the romance, *la luz de la luna*, the moonlight on the river... Anyone can pay a bribe at the border and drive a truck across. *(approaching)* Perhaps you and *la señorita* will appreciate *una poca oportunidad* yourselves. I like to help young couples. What do you say...a chance to make *un mil* say, a thousand?

ROBERTO: *¿Dólares?*

EL TRAFICANTE: *Ah, sí.* Pity the poor peso.

ROBERTO: How?

EL TRAFICANTE: *(pointing to his bag on the sand)* My other bag is exactly like this one, *idéntico.* And it is *exactamente, precisamente* opposite this point on the other side. You cannot possibly *salir mal*, you cannot go wrong. Go back *para mi bolsa, mi saco, señor. ("praying" to him) Piedad, señor, compasión...* As you can see my bag here

is lonely for the other.

ROBERTO: Why don't you go back for your own bag, strictly for the romance, *la luz*, the moonlight on the river?

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, the *señor* is *muy inteligente*, he has a sense of humour.

ROBERTO: *(approaching* EL TRAFICANTE*)* If you want to pay us a thousand, pay us a thousand to watch this bag while you go back for the other.

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, *muy astuto, sutil*. The *señor* is even shrewder than I thought. The truth is, *señor*, I used to be able to cross the river ten times a night, but now I would rather sit here on the sand and wait for you. What do you say, senor? A thousand dollars for walking back across the river.

ROBERTO *lifts* EL TRAFICANTE'S *bag, hefts its weight, sets it down.*

ROBERTO: Pay me now.

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, and how do I know you won't run off with *mi saco* and sell *mis armas* yourself? No, no. Five hundred now. Five hundred when you bring my bag.

ROBERTO *looks at* MARIA *who silently assents, then at* EL TRAFICANTE, *who hands him five hundred dollars which* ROBERTO *pockets.* ROBERTO *and* MARIA *start across the river.*

EL TRAFICANTE: *Ah, no Señor*. The *señorita* must stay here. Otherwise you might be gone with my thirty *automáticos*, and I will be out not only my five hundred dollars, not only my three thou wholesale, which you may be sure I have also already parted with, but my fifteen grand, of which twelve thou, shall we say eleven when you get back, is pure *beneficio*, profit. And all because I like to help couples in distress. My heart would be broken. *(when* ROBERTO *hesitates)* I'll tell you what, *señor. De más, un poco adicional, un suplemento...* I'll let you keep one of my shiny *automáticos*. You never know when it might come in handy.

MARIA: We have no need of your *automáticos, señor.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, the *señorita* can speak. No, no, of course not. The senorita has *prudencia* beyond her years, wisdom. I was only fooling. A little joke, *un chiste.* What need has such a loving couple of... But, look! You can see it from here, my bag. It is exactly opposite this one. It won't take you ten minutes, both ways, *inclusivo.* I have just come from there myself. Truly, there is not a speck of quicksand, not a single stinking pond, between you and a thousand dollars, your dowry, your nest eggs, as they say, alive and well.

ROBERTO *and* MARIA *mumble.* MARIA *returns to stand at a distance from* EL TRAFICANTE, *the bag between them.* ROBERTO *wades into the darkness.* EL TRAFICANTE *smiles and the dogs are heard again, yet nearer, somewhat disturbed though not quite having found a scent.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Such a wise *señorita!* I see you have the level head. You know you cannot start a new life without money, not even in a land not worth fencing, where the wind cracks the lips and a single peso lies heavy in the hand...

MARIA: How do you know we are starting a new life?

EL TRAFICANTE: There is no other, *señorita.* The old one is gone. But, speaking of the old one, now that I have heard you speak and seen you—what is the word?—ah, "strolling" away from me, don't I know you from somewhere, haven't I already in that life which is gone given you a little gift for a little gift of yourself?

MARIA: I don't know what you're talking about.

EL TRAFICANTE: No? Perhaps Roberto doesn't either. Perhaps he does. But Roberto would drown himself in the river if he were to know some of the details, the little tricks, the stunts a *señorita* can do *con dos hombres, con un perro.*

MARIA: *(stifling a scream) !Mentiroso!* Liar!

EL TRAFICANTE: Shh, *señorita*, if you were to scream, Roberto would come bounding back like some mongrel, some cur without my bag. *Señorita*, not only will I keep my mouth shut, but I will give you a little something to help you and your young man on your new life.

Beat. MARIA *hangs her head, barely able to speak.*

MARIA: A little something?

EL TRAFICANTE: *(laughing)* Yes. I am rich, *señorita*. As I said, I splash across the river *por la aventura*, the adventure. And guess what?

MARIA: *(barely audible)* What?

EL TRAFICANTE: Something caught the toe of my boot, *señorita*, in the river. *(dangling* MARIA'S *locket)* What is this, I wonder. Some *regalo*, some *relicario*...

MARIA: Give it...

EL TRAFICANTE: But no. I want to see. *(opening it)* Oh, well, it's just a picture of a house in the moonlight, a man and woman eating in a courtyard underneath a hundred-year-old...

MARIA: That is mine.

EL TRAFICANTE: It was yours. It will be yours again. When the river gives it to you.

EL TRAFICANTE *raises his arm to return the locket to the river.*

MARIA: No...!

EL TRAFICANTE: No? *(pocketing it)* Well perhaps not. Not if all goes well. And just to make it easier, look what else this lucky fellow—me, *yo mismo*—stumbled, or shall I say splashed, upon on the other side. Look! *!Miras, te miras!*

Having dug MARIA'S *mask out of his bag, he holds it to her face. She gasps.*

EL TRAFICANTE: What? Was the *señorita* worried it was lost? *Ay no,* nothing is ever lost. Not completely. The gods are always right there...*omnipresente*...to hand it back; it comes bobbing up just when we least expect it. Come, *señorita,* put it on. We know it fits. Everybody on the river knows. Take it, wear it, and who knows what else may be yours?

MARIA *accepts the mask, puts it on. Her voice changes to that of the worldly, older* MARIA.

MARIA: *(brazenly)* Cock of the river, blackmailer, thief... *¿Cuánto?*

EL TRAFICANTE: *(covering his ears, uncovering them) ¿Cuánto?* Now we're talking. What do you say to another thousand, *señorita?* That way you will have two thousand between you.

MARIA: *Dólares, por supuesto.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Of course. I would hardly be talking about pesos, not to such a fetching senorita, *una encantadora como tú*...even if you did once accept them.

MARIA: *(holding out her hand) Pagame. En este momento.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, *señorita.* I was not born yesterday. Here. *(going to her)* Here are five big ones. There will be five more after.

MARIA *accepts the money, tucks it in her blouse and, after glancing into the darkness of the river, drops to her knees in the sand before* EL TRAFICANTE, *who laughs outright as the dogs are heard close enough to be running along the river.*

EL TRAFICANTE: *(caressing her head with both hands) Ah, señorita,* you mustn't pray to me. I am but a humble *hombre de negocios,* a businessman. *(dropping to his knees, facing her)* But you, *señorita...sirena, nereida*...goddess of the dead water and the plastic bags... Are you sure a thousand is enough? A girl like you is worth a fortune. *(holding up another five hundred dollars)* Allow this humble *traficante* to pay his unworthy respects. I will

give you a thousand now and another thousand a little later, if only...

MARIA: If only...?

EL TRAFICANTE: If only you remove that stinking *máscara de puta* I was ill-fated enough to find, and you were ill-starred enough to stick on your heavenly face, *nuestra señorita de la tierra de saco plástico, de los profilácticos*...of gum wrappers and toilet paper, of all that floats and stinks, or sinks but is forever found. What do you say, *señorita*, enough to begin your new life with a *televisor*, if not a used *coche, un carro*, some loud, limping, stinking old Chevy...or, on the other hand, a cradle of white and gold for your *milagro*, the love child of those dying eggs, that tadpole of your depths, the polliwog, *la infanta* you never thought was possible?

Slowly MARIA *removes the mask and puts it in her knapsack. Still on her knees, she slowly faces* EL TRAFICANTE, *who slips another five hundred dollars in her teeth.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, what lips, *señorita*. No, keep my greenbacks right there. No. Hold your tears. You mustn't cry on my hard-earned *dinero*. Not here. Young men can see across the river. It would be better if Roberto didn't see your tears, wouldn't it? Up there, in the bushes, you can cry your heart out...you can break it on the rocks. *(caressing her face)* I am ready. It will take no longer, *señorita*, than a tiny blessing, a benediction. Up there...in the dirt... *(dangling the locket)* You want your study of a courtyard, don't you, your couple nibbling by moonlight... *(opening it)* But look, the courtyard's empty, not a soul... Is that before or after, I wonder; what's past or what's to come?

MARIA *reaches for it, but* EL TRAFICANTE *pockets it again.* MARIA *stands, the money still in her mouth, and begins to make her way into the shadows opposite the river.*

EL TRAFICANTE: *(standing, watching her walk)* Ah, truly, not one of us, this Maria of the plastic bags, but some goddess; at the least, a saint...

The second word will stop her.

EL TRAFICANTE: *¡Puta! ¡¡Perra!!*

MARIA *stands with her back to him, politely.*

EL TRAFICANTE: *Espera, señorita.* You cannot just "stroll" off like that with my half grand in your teeth. You must hold your dress *como nuestra señorita.* You must not touch the feelthy steenking riverbank *con tu vestido sacro.*

MARIA *begins to walk again, her dress lifted behind her.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Higher. Higher, Maria. Remember: you are not of this world. You are too good for it. You love the ancient courtyards, the bubbling water, the sound of the piano... Higher. That's it. *Ah, qué piernas, diosa mía, qué... ¡Qué....!* No, I cannot say it. *(hurrying after her)* But it is there all the same...

Exit MARIA, *the money in her teeth, her dress held high behind her, with* EL TRAFICANTE *on her heels. For several moments there is no sound but the overloud snuffling of dogs quite near in the darkness and the chuckling of the river. Suddenly, the dogs howl and, in the distance, the coyotes laugh. A moment later* MARIA *and* EL TRAFICANTE *return,* MARIA *with dirty knees, hiding her money...and, her shyness returned, her face.* EL TRAFICANTE *goes down to the river where he squats and washes himself.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Very good, Maria. Better than I remembered. *De primera clase.* I hope, when you are settled, if you ever find yourself short of funds...for a ceiling of stars, say, for a child's eyes to glance up to from its cradle of white and gold, or even a bleeding Christ to hang upon the wall...you will remember this night by the river and...*mi número.* (*washed, zipped, formally presenting her with his card) Señorita, mi tarjeta.*

MARIA: *(reading, barely audible) "El Traficante."*

EL TRAFICANTE: *(proudly) Sí.* Not *"El narcotraficante,"* you will note. I am not like that scum, that *espuma,* those dregs, that *escoria.* No, no. Perhaps you have seen my business card on the wall in the Holiday Inn in *Ciudad Juárez.* Or the police station in El Paso. Yes, I am a pillar of

the community, *señorita*, as you now know. You see my cell phone number there, my fax. I am at your... And here, my dear Maria, I almost forgot: your locket. *(as she accepts it)* Ah, but no looking. No, you're not to open it till later, later tonight, after the...the fireworks, so to speak. But who could that be splashing towards us? One of the Robertos? There are so many, aren't there? Don't worry. On my honour, *señorita*, as to that other business, my lips are sealed.

Enter ROBERTO, *once more wet to the knees, a heavy bag over his shoulder. He drops the one bag by the other, holds out his hand, into which* EL TRAFICANTE *smilingly deposits five hundred dollars.*

ROBERTO: *(taking* MARIA'S *arm) Gracias.*

EL TRAFICANTE: *(taking them both in with his eyes) Gracias Ustedes.*

ROBERTO, *takes* MARIA'S *hand, leading her into the night.* EL TRAFICANTE *lets them go some distance before he calls.*

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, but Roberto, Maria, there is just one more little matter. Another opportunity, shall we say.

ROBERTO *pauses.* MARIA, *still stunned, shakes her head, but he does not see.*

ROBERTO: What is it?

EL TRAFICANTE: As you can see, I can hardly go on from here. I am not so young. I cannot carry both bags to their destination. *Mi correo,* my courier this night will find his pockets stuffed...*rellenos!* He has only to take these bags about a mile...in there, and return.

ROBERTO: Now you're across the river you can take them one at a time yourself.

EL TRAFICANTE: Ah, I used to. But it is not so easy anymore. It is uphill. And as much as I love south, I hate uphill, don't you? Perhaps you don't mind, but my guns are heavy. And El Gato waits in there somewhere. El Gato too is getting older. He no longer likes to crouch in the shadows, *en las sombras*. He sits in his car, in his taco

wagon, at a safe distance, listening to his radio, to the *mariachis*. If you listen, you can hear him.

All listen southeast: nothing. All listen southwest: the car radio throbs in the night, the mariachis raise their voices, El Gato is heard humming above the others.

EL TRAFICANTE: Hear? He is playing it safe now, so that his son might also drive a Mercedes and his son's sons go to college.

MARIA: *(to herself, still nearly in shock)* Roberto has been to college.

EL TRAFICANTE: Has he? Have you, Roberto? A lot of good it's done you, I'm sure. I'm impressed. And since *el hombre* is also still young and strong, perhaps he will see the advantages of carrying my bags into the shadows. It is not a mile, not a *kilómetro*. Follow that *arroyo*. It will not be difficult for you.

ROBERTO: And then?

EL TRAFICANTE: And then you exchange *mis armas* for a far lighter bag, and you trip back down to the river and hand it to me. Ten percent, *hombre*. *Dólares o pesos*, for wherever you and the *señorita* propose to begin your new life. Think of it, my sixty *automáticos* at five hundred each, nearly another three thou for you and, together with what you and the *señorita* already have, *hace cuatro mil y pues cinco...*

ROBERTO: Who's El Gato?

EL TRAFICANTE: A former partner. I did not want to become involved in the white powder. I merely help El Gato protect himself from...from the men without scruples, the slime, *los hombres viscosos... (suddenly)* Well? Well!

ROBERTO: I'm thinking.

EL TRAFICANTE: But what are you thinking, *hombre?*

ROBERTO: Whether El Gato will kill me or you will. *(over* EL TRAFICANTE*'s laughter)* Whether I will be killed after

humping your guns in the dark or after I have carried your quick bucks back to you.

EL TRAFICANTE: *(closer, setting down, opening his bag)* Look, *hombre. (he withdraws a black automatic from which* ROBERTO *and* MARIA *shrink)* A Colt nine milimeter. *(smelling it)* Brand new. *(removing the clip)* And loaded. See? Lovely little bullets which fly right through body armour as if it isn't there, which penetrate the heart, the lungs, sever the spine, calm the unquiet soul. *(replacing the clip, advancing a shell to the firing chamber)* A token of my faith in such an upright *hombre* and as good as *mi palabra de honour, no? (handing the gun to* ROBERTO*)* Here. As offered earlier. There. You are as good as any of us millionaires. A man among men. *Un hombre importante.*

ROBERTO: It is very beautiful, Maria. Feel it. Feel its weight. Perhaps with it, I will be safe.

MARIA: *(recovering her alertness)* Don't Roberto. Give it back. Throw it in the river. We don't need this kind of protection.

ROBERTO: It may be our chance, Maria. A year's money, two years' money, in a night.

EL TRAFICANTE: That's right.

MARIA: We have enough as it is.

EL TRAFICANTE: Do you, *señorita?* Tell us about it. No, as Roberto knows, it's not going from door to door with a degree in accounting. Computers do that now. Or was it animal husbandry? But then the animals can climb each other without your help, can't they, *mis hijos?* Think, Roberto. It is your chance to buy back the ruined house of Maria's parents, to replace the broken windows, tune the piano, water the stump of the hundred-year-old tree; to picnic, perhaps, in the ruins...

ROBERTO: How do you know of all that, El Traficante?

EL TRAFICANTE: I know, Roberto. Some things are known. They are the talk of the river. You see? In spite of all that has occurred, or not occurred, your hearts are whole. This is a love story after all and we appreciate it. We follow every episode, glued to our *televisors*, following every twist and turn of our *telenovela*, a *telenovela* like the river, endless and endlessly changing. Actors die or get better offers, but the *telenovela* flows on, uniting the beautiful and the ugly, the haves and have-nots. It is addictive, Roberto and Maria, your story, the story of your love. I cannot turn you off. I wonder what you are going to do next. What is going to happen to Roberto? Will he come stumbling back, a man of means in one night, to Maria? Will they live happily *para siempre y siempre*...or will something go wrong? Will he, in spite of the beautiful *automático* in his hand, die miserably, face down in the laughing river? Yes, your *telenovela* is better than the white, the white lady herself. You know the white lady, Roberto?

ROBERTO: I know her.

EL TRAFICANTE: Of course you do. At night she sneaks into the detention centre, doesn't she? She makes boys happy who have never been happy, not once in their lives. She makes her appearance here too, on the river, on nights when the moonlight is right. Or wrong. Some call her Maria.

MARIA: I don't believe you.

EL TRAFICANTE: If you saw her, you would believe. Who knows? You might see her tonight. This Maria, the white lady, *la gringa*, walking like a drowned woman, *la mujer del río*, looking for her lost son, they say. She does not know he is alive and well, she breathed her last before she knew; she does not know that he has found a Maria of his own, that he has found a way to make a year's salary in one night, that they are on the point of being happy for ever and ever.

Suddenly ROBERTO *drops the gun in the sand, stands facing* EL TRAFICANTE *who looks down at it.*

EL TRAFICANTE: What, not a word? You, the young man of talent, of imagination, *de palabrería, de hablar por hablar,* have nothing to say?

ROBERTO: Nothing, *nada,* for you, *señor,* no more.

MARIA: *(softly)* Thank you, Roberto.

EL TRAFICANTE: And you drop my lovely oiled *automático* in the sand...!

ROBERTO: In the river shit, Traficante, where you can grovel for it or not.

EL TRAFICANTE *hesitates, then retrieves the gun, replaces it, hefts his heavy bags and moves off along the river.*

EL TRAFICANTE: If not you, *muchacho,* then another. There are other Robertos. They are all along the river. They stand in the stinking shallows, *los braceros,* the day labourers, waiting for me. Yes, I am *el traficante. (leaving)* You are nobody. You will die a nobody, your degree in your pocket, your eyes locked to those of your Maria—asking why, why; why me...??—your love running out in a puddle.

Exit EL TRAFICANTE *to the south. The dogs are heard moving away.* ROBERTO *and* MARIA *cling to each other.*

MARIA: That was so close, so close. I do not know as much as I thought I knew but, Roberto, I think you almost died then. Tonight. If you had made the wrong decision, you would have died. Here and now. I would have been alone again. Let us not go into *la tierra sin vida, la tierra muerta,* like horses run from the Spanish, our lives running out of us like sand from a high place. Let us go back. Let us go to my parents' house. Yes, it is a ruin. There are no pictures on the wall. We had to sell them. The fountain is dry. But it is still ours, Roberto, and somehow, Roberto, it is alive...

ROBERTO: Yes. Let us go. And though we cross this way, then that, we are no wetbacks stealing elephants on the road to Los Angeles...

MARIA: *(laughing)* No.

ROBERTO: I am not running through the night, the television I stole years ago in my arms... Rather I have my Maria, and this too, this baptism, is our marriage. *(pulling her by the hand)* Come, Maria, into the dirty water, across it...

MARIA: Yes!

With their first steps, a single shot from the darkness drops ROBERTO. *Then, as* MARIA *kneels at his side in the shallows, an automatic is emptied in their direction, the bullets whining overhead and splashing the water around them. Silence. The dogs are heard at a considerable distance. They have a scent now; they are headed elsewhere. An exchange of gunfire is heard off, the fire of one participant receding, becoming intermittent then ceasing.* MARIA, *finding the wound, helps* ROBERTO *up. She helps him towards her house.* KELLY'S *car radio is briefly heard as* KELLY *appears behind them.*

KELLY: *(replacing his gun)* They nearly had you that time, Roberto.

ROBERTO: Hello, Kelly. I was wondering if you were still around.

KELLY: You can stop wondering. Too bad you didn't have a little firepower of your own. They might not have bothered with you then. But no, you had to say no to El Traficante. Where is it?

MARIA: In the leg, I think.

KELLY: Lucky. *(approaching, kneeling)* Not much blood. A flesh wound. Your luck is all over the place, Roberto. *(binding his leg)* You don't deserve this.

MARIA: Let us go, Mr. Kelly. Once more.

KELLY: Once more, Maria? How can I? Am I not bound by the law to return Roberto and his television?

ROBERTO: Who are you fooling? Are you bound by the law to do business with El Traficante? What do you do, Kelly? Make his nights safe? Is that it: have you taken back the night for *el traficante de armas?* You get your

mordida, don't you, Kelly? Did you ever think, Kelly, when you were my age, or younger, watching your beloved movies—the ones you showed to us I'll bet—and dreaming dreams of the leading man, the top dog you'd be, did you ever think you'd grow up a minor accomplice to a gunrunner, a stinking accessory to a cartel?

KELLY: I must be honest. The truth is, Roberto, it never crossed my mind.

ROBERTO: Just like you never really have to cross the river. You leave that to other men who find other men who find me or...

KELLY: Or another. Think, Roberto, it doesn't matter what side I'm on. I'm on yours. You know that, don't you?

With MARIA'S *help,* ROBERTO *takes a few steps, favouring his wounded leg.*

ROBERTO: I don't know what I know. I think I've forgotten.

KELLY: Think! I've crossed now. Here I am on this side. I've never done that before. Roberto, do you know how hard I could have made it for you?

ROBERTO: I know.

KELLY: Then why...? Why go over the wall with a college degree? Why run to Mexico one minute, to Maria's the next? You're breaking my heart!

ROBERTO: Where have I heard that before?

KELLY: *(coldly)* I don't know, Roberto. Was it your mother?

ROBERTO: *(advancing)* What do you know about my mother?

KELLY: *(drawing his gun)* Just what Martinez told me.

ROBERTO: Who's Martinez?

KELLY: No one. A border guard. Everyone knows everyone

else down here. It's a wonder I could keep your story straight. All the Robertos have mothers, Roberto, and all their hearts are broken. They didn't want them waiting for that truck, the truck that knows just where cheap labour waits. Your mother, Roberto, she cared.

ROBERTO: Yes.

KELLY: Then why didn't she come to visit you, Roberto? All those years becoming a man, an educated man and no mother to reach between the bars to squeeze your hand.

ROBERTO: I'd lost her.

KELLY: Lost her?

ROBERTO: At the river.

KELLY: This one?

ROBERTO: *(nodding)* Not far from here.

KELLY: And for her you persisted, for her you finished your education?

ROBERTO: I did.

KELLY: Then why...! Why ruin it, why escape when you'd done it, when you were there already?

ROBERTO: That ruining was for myself.

KELLY: For yourself? You destroy yourself for yourself?

ROBERTO: Something like that.

KELLY: You mean it wasn't fate? It wasn't something the angels all lined up across the sky sang to you?

ROBERTO: Enough of this! Why! Because I lost her, that's why. Because I don't deserve any better. Because the river stinks, because the sun sets, because the lights go out

at night, because we lose the loves of our lives and our children are always unborn. Because, at best, we save a fragment, some bit the river didn't carry away. Go on, Kelly. Shoot if you're going to.

MARIA: Don't shoot him, Mr. Kelly.

KELLY: No, Maria. I'm not going to. *(putting his gun away)* Go on you two. Go wherever you like. Mexico. Maria's house. I don't care. I'm not dragging you back, standing by you, giving you your chance once more. At the end it'll be a Doctor of Philosophy scrambling over the fence and a guard from the old folks' home running after him. Go on, both of you. Wait a minute. You know that might be what he's going to do to you, Maria, you know it might be your heart next.

MARIA: I know what I know.

KELLY: I'm glad one of you does. Well. Goodbye to both of you. May I never see either again...

Exit KELLY *into the night.* ROBERTO *and* MARIA *wait a moment, watching him go.*

MARIA: Is this it?

ROBERTO: I think so.

MARIA: The river has let us go, we're free?

ROBERTO: We're free.

ROBERTO *and* MARIA *run off, hand in hand, crossing the river at another angle, towards her house, almost giggling with excitement.*

Entremés. Interlude.

ROBERTO'S MAMA *enters from the river, following* ROBERTO'S *footsteps. She is weak, sick, wavering with weakness. Reading the action in the sand, she discovers* ROBERTO'S *blood and drops to her knees to hold it in her hands, to raise it to her face. Looking across the river in the direction of* MARIA'S *house, she opens her mouth to cry out, but no sound comes. Enter*

ROBERTO'S PAPA, *following the tracks of old along the riverbank. Also weak, wavering, he mutters to himself.*

PAPA: Roberto, Roberto... I told you. In two hours. We will meet just where we are now, in the selfsame identical spot, *el mismo*, but no. You, young, foolish... *(he sees* MAMA*)* Mama, is that you?

Unable to speak, MAMA *nods.*

PAPA: I almost forgot, Mama. I was looking for you too, wasn't I? *(kneeling, facing her)* And now I've found you.

MAMA, *weakening and leaning against him, stirs herself to show him the blood in the sand and to point in the direction of* MARIA'S *house, but* PAPA *is oblivious.*

PAPA: Look! Here it is! The bush! I would have known it anywhere. I hope I didn't walk right by it years ago. Mama, tell me, have you seen a bush like this one on the other side, *exactamente, precisamente idéntico?* Roberto said... Never mind what Roberto said. Mama, if I'd known I was going to find you, I would have forgiven him everything. He is going to go well, isn't he, our son, *saliera bueno?* If he led me to you, he can do anything. Isn't that the truth? Isn't that the truth, Mama? Speak to me. Tell me, Mama, *es la verdad, no?*

MAMA, *unable to speak but shaking her head "no," leans into him. Their figures merge in the darkness,* PAPA *gesturing silently but persuasively.*

Scene 3

The same night. MARIA'S *house: the ruined courtyard, moonlight, the hundred-year-old tree with its branches cut.* ROBERTO *and* MARIA *enter cautiously,* MARIA *aiding the wounded* ROBERTO *to sit on the low wall of the fountain.*

ROBERTO: All I want to do is lie down and...

MARIA: You will rest. *(leaning close)* In me.

ROBERTO: *(he nods)* What is there to eat?

MARIA: Some cactus fruit. A run-over dog. The sky. A couple of stars.

ROBERTO: It seems...I've always been looking forward...to the... the feast...and then...a bath. Whatever happened to the bath?

MARIA: I am going to be the feast. And the bath.

ROBERTO: *(closing his eyes)* That is all I ever...

MARIA: However...

Removing her knapsack, MARIA *finds an apple and a little cheese. She spreads them on a handkerchief on the wall of the fountain, a napkin white in the moonlight.*

ROBERTO: *Bonito.*

MARIA: *¿Qué?*

ROBERTO: *El banquete matrimonial, la manzana.* But what is a marriage feast without....

MARIA: Wait. I just thought of something.

Exit MARIA. *Alone,* ROBERTO, *in considerable pain, attempts to move his leg. He finds more blood on his hand which he wipes before she returns with a bottle of dark red wine.*

MARIA: Look. One of my father's. He used to hide them, one by one. *(opening it)* Will you drink from the bottle?

ROBERTO *nods.*

MARIA: That's good. Some of the best people, they say... *(seeing the darkness of his leg, cutting his pant leg)* But first we will cut these open, we will bind your leg again. In my dream, I was trying to get your pants off when I woke up.

ROBERTO: *(laughing quietly)* I remember.

MARIA: How could you? This is going to hurt.

ROBERTO: Less than cheaper stuff.

MARIA: I hope so.

MARIA *pours some of the wine on* ROBERTO'S *leg. He winces, stifling a cry. She rebinds his leg with a bit of her own clothing.*

MARIA: *(watching the bandage darken)* We should get help.

ROBERTO: They'll just take me back. I couldn't go back again.

MARIA: I couldn't wait for you again. But drink now. Eat. This is the night we've been waiting for.

MARIA *sits on the wall beside* ROBERTO. *They eat, drink, and as they do, the house returns to life. First there are lights in distant rooms, the sounds of movement, then the lanterns begin to glow and the fountain comes crankily, weakly to life. The singers are heard faintly in the distance.*

ROBERTO: Is this a dream, Maria?

MARIA: We haven't paid the electricity. And, I think I told you, the water's gone.

ROBERTO: Has it rained?

MARIA: It rained every day you were away.

ROBERTO: *Otro río.*

MARIA: *Río de lágrimas.*

ROBERTO: *(raising the bottle)* This is my blood.

MARIA: *(also drinking)* Yes.

The meal over, the apple shared, the lights and sounds, the fountain, cease as uncertainly and faintly as they came on. The two are left looking at each other in silence.

ROBERTO: I guess it's not so easy to bring a house to life. We

never lived here and now...

MARIA: I'm not going to die.

ROBERTO: I thought, when the fountain was full, you were going to throw yourself in.

MARIA: Not me. If you die, Roberto, it will break my heart. That will be death enough.

ROBERTO: Then I won't die. I'll get better. But first... *(*ROBERTO *stands with difficulty)*

MARIA: What are you doing?

ROBERTO: Just this.

ROBERTO *lowers a bucket into the fountain and carries it dripping to the hundred-year-old tree.*

ROBERTO: *(slowly pouring the water on its roots)* Take. Drink. Hundred-year-old tree, a hundred years is not nearly enough. You must see more before you die. I, too, must complete my education. *(when* MARIA *laughs)* Kelly was wrong about the PhD though. No, Maria, I shall ferry youths across the river; I shall drive them north; I shall place them in schools, in good jobs. None of my young men shall die or be caught and sent back. I shall carry pure water, box lunches, little bags of peanuts. I'll have an eight-hundred number.

They are standing by the tree, MARIA *supporting* ROBERTO *who speaks graciously if weakly. The moonlight becomes especially bright and a new leaf or two is seen on the tree.*

MARIA: Roberto! It's alive! Look!

ROBERTO: Perhaps it was never dead.

Again the music is heard off, the sounds of life in other rooms; again the lanterns flicker and the fountain weakly spurts. This time MARIA'S MAMA *and* MARIA'S PAPA *appear, formally dressed as they were at the end of Act I.*

MARIA: Mama. Papa. I thought you were...

MAMA: Shh, Maria. We come back every once in a while, to check on your father's bottles. He wouldn't enjoy it at all if he thought we were...

ROBERTO: Thank you, Maria's father and mother, for this fine child of thirty you are giving...into my hands...

PAPA: Into his...? Ah, yes. That is what this is all about. Why are you babbling about my bottles, Mama? I'm here to give away the bride, to hand over the damaged goods.

MARIA: Papa!

PAPA: Well, it's true, isn't it?

MARIA: Yes.

PAPA: And does your young man know?

MARIA: He knows.

PAPA: Does he mind?

ROBERTO: I don't mind, Papa. I'm glad to be getting a woman of such...

PAPA: Shall we say "background," for the ground is beneath it all, even with the water gone, out of reach, the earth's caverns drained, dry as the river; the vistas endless. There are places, *se dice*, where there is nothing, nothing at all...hoof prints in the...

MAMA: Papa, really. That's enough. Hoof prints! *(to* ROBERTO*)* I'm glad you're glad, *mi hijo*, to be getting a woman of such—what was it, Papa?

PAPA: Background.

MARIA: Mama, Papa, haven't we gone on long enough about my background? Can't we talk about something else?

PAPA: *(sniffing the air)* Ahh! Ahh! Well, I'll be damned: 1966. Low Life High and all that. *(a rhetorical question)* Maria, am I getting a whiff of my favourite vintage or am I...?

MARIA: It was his wound, Papa. We had to care for Roberto's wound. *(handing the bottle to* PAPA*)* Care for a slug?

MAMA: Haven't I told you not to say "slug" Maria? You can hardly expect your father to drink from the bottle *como de clase baja. María: ¡las copas!*

PAPA: Mama, we sold the crystal, remember? Some upstart, some crook who did better than I, bought it.

MAMA: Don't you remember, Papa? I saved four *copas*. I hid them right here.

MAMA *produces four wine glasses.* PAPA *fills them, tasting his own.*

PAPA: *(sipping)* Ah, that's breathing a little life into old bones! Mama, I hope you remembered the invitations. Somehow I always expected...

From this point MAMA *and* PAPA *begin to weaken.*

PAPA: ...let's see now, who...I was sure they'd be here... Zapata and...and...

MAMA: And Madero.

PAPA: Yes, yes! But where are they...? Emiliano...! Francisco...! You are not dead! *¡Viva Madero! ¡Viv...!* Suddenly I'm tired as hell, mama. All I want to do is lie down and.

MAMA: *(holding him up)* I'm sure everyone understands, Papa. All right, Maria, hurry up now... *(weakening)* ...off with Roberto's...off with his...somehow I cannot say it... *(beginning to collapse herself)* ...all right... Roberto...off with her, with her...

PAPA: ...what Mama's trying to say, Roberto and Maria... *(weakly clutching* MAMA*)* ...what I'm trying...ah, I remember now...something... *(sliding down her)* ...sss...does that sound right...Mama...kssss...?

MAMA: *(more weakly)* ...that's right, Papa...kisss...

As ROBERTO *and* MARIA *embrace and kiss, a sudden single shot fells* ROBERTO. MAMA *and* PAPA *are gone.* MARIA *stands over* ROBERTO, *stunned. The lights and sounds, which have been steadily increasing to this point, cease. The house is dead again.* MARIA *looks slowly around her when suddenly three more shots are fired into* ROBERTO'S *leaping body.* MARIA *screams, falls on him, holding him. The wind blows through an empty courtyard. The river is heard in the distance, its chuckling growing louder as the moonlight fades.*

MARIA: *(rocking his body in her arms)* Roberto, Roberto, I thought everything...everything was going to be....

Enter MARTINEZ, *to look down at the two.*

MARTINEZ: Did you? I told you...that was you, wasn't it? You or another. I told you that's how it would end, didn't I? Bang-bang-bang. Come now. Drop that. *Los restos.* Drop all that leaks, that oozes, that returns, at the end, to its essential elements, its *químicos. (bending over* MARIA, *gently) Se dice, madrecita,* they say that nothing matters; least of all, matter: slime to slime and muck to muck... *(suddenly)* Drop that thing!

MARIA *drops* ROBERTO.

MARTINEZ: Now, will you splash back or be processed? Save me a little paperwork, will you?

After a moment, MARIA *stands proudly, if shakily.*

MARIA: I... I'll splash back.

Exit MARIA, *looking back at* ROBERTO.

MARTINEZ: Good. That's as it should be. South of the border, *madrecita.* Go on, into the landscape, the dry, the

endless vistas, the stone carved by winds, by ancient seas; into the place where there is nothing, hoof prints in the rock, horses run from the Spanish. *...nada y nada y nada y nada más...*

MARTINEZ *laughs and turns to address* ROBERTO.

MARTINEZ: But what about your bride, fella, not going with her? What's that look, fella, that *mascarilla*, that open mouth, forever asking something of a cold dawn; a flushed, an empty sky? It can't be disappointment on the face of one so young, so talented, who was not like the others? What's wrong, *hombre*, no *buena suerte*, no *buena fortuna?* You must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, *salió mal... (leaning close)* Not that easy to follow the twists and turns of this life, is it, *niño*? Not that easy to get across.

MARTINEZ *takes out his crackling radio, speaks into it.*

MARTINEZ: Kelly? Martinez. Looks like one of your boys, Kelly. One less for you, buddy, one more for the river...

Pocketing his radio and turning from ROBERTO, MARTINEZ *discovers* MARIA'S *locket on the ground.*

MARTINEZ: But what's this? *(opens the locket, blows the sand out)* What a lovely woman, if a little old for my... Must be somebody's mother, somebody's dead mother. *(glancing at* ROBERTO*)* Whose could it be, fella? Yours?

MARTINEZ *throws the locket on* ROBERTO, *strolls off, waiting for* KELLY, *lighting a cigarette, talking to himself.*

MARTINEZ: *¡Jesús, qué trabajo!* If the angels had eyes...

END OF PLAY

Contributors

bill bisset first publishd in prism with killer whale a pome in part abt oppressiv govrnments n th horrors uv th vietnam war n finding love c. 1966 latest book peter among th towring boxes talonbooks n latest cd rumours uv hurricane with mewsik uv bill roberts from red deer press thees pomes heer ar from narrativ enigma work in progress 2 b releesd in fall 04 from talonbooks its great 2 b in prism agen

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Rosalind M. Gill teaches French as a second language and is Chair of the School of Translation at Glendon College, York University. She has published several translations of books on Quebec, as well as a French-language textbook. Her own short stories and her translations of poetry from French and Spanish have appeared in various literary reviews.

Harald Hartung was born in 1932 and has received such awards as the Annette-von-Droste-Hülshoff Prize and The Premio Antico Fattore. His work is regularly included in anthologies of contemporary German poetry. The translations in this issue are from his latest book of poetry, *Langsamer träumen.* He lives in Berlin.

Adam Honsinger has had fiction published in *Exile* and *Pottersfield Portfolio.* He has recently completed a collection of short fiction and is currently working on a novel. He lives in Vancouver.

Admiel Kosman (b.1957) is a prominent Israeli religious poet and intellectual and is a senior lecturer at the Department of Talmud at Bar Ilan University. He is the author of six books including, *Higa'nu Le'Elohim, Ma Ani Yakhol,* and *Perush Hadash B"sd:Shirim.*

Michael McGuire's biography is on page 48.

George McWhirter is co-founder of PRISM *international* and an award-winning poet and translator. His first book, *Catalan Poems* (Oberon Press), shared the 1972 Commonwealth Prize. Since then he has published three books of short stories, five more books of poetry, three novels, and two books of translation. This year, he will retire from his position as professor of creative writing at the University of British Columbia.

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Varda Koch Ocker was born in Isreal and holds undergraduate degrees in English and History from Tel Aviv University as well as an M.A. in Medieval Studies from Yale. She lives in San Anselmo, California.

Alain Paiement is a Montreal-based artist. His recent exhibitions include Galerie de l'UQAM in Montreal in 2002; Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal in 2003; Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver in 2004; and the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in Quebec City, 2004.

Eric Paul Shaffer is the author of four books of poetry including *Portable Planet* and *Living at the Monestary, Working in the Kitchen.* His work has appeared in *ACM, American Scholar, Grain, North American Review, Threepenny Review,* and *100 Poets Against the War.* Shaffer Recieved the 2002 Elliot Cades Award for Literature.

Michael Trussler teaches English at the University of Regina. He has published poetry, short fiction, and literary criticism in numerous journals.

Camilo Venegas was born in Camerones, Cuba, in 1967. He is a graduate of the Escuela Nacional de Arte, where he specialized in theatre. He has published four books of poetry, most recently *Itinerario.* He now lives in Santo Domingo, where he is cultural editor of the newspaper *El Caribe.*

Bryan Wade is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of British Columbia where he teaches drama. His stage plays have been reproduced across Canada at major venues like the Factory Theatre Lab, Toronto Free Theatre, and Tarragon Theatre. He has also been Playwright-in-Residence at Factory Theatre and the Blyth Festival. Serial radio dramas he was written for include: *Nightfall, Morningside,* and *Sunday Showcase.*

Kathleen Winter has published stories in *The Malahat Review, Geist, TickleAce, The Fiddlehead,* and *The Antigonish Review,* and has been nominated for a National Magazine Award for Fiction and a Journey Prize Anthology. Currently, she is completing a short fiction collection with the help of a grant from the Canada Council and a residency at Gibraltar Point Centre on Toronto Island.

Creative Writing M.F.A. at U.B.C.

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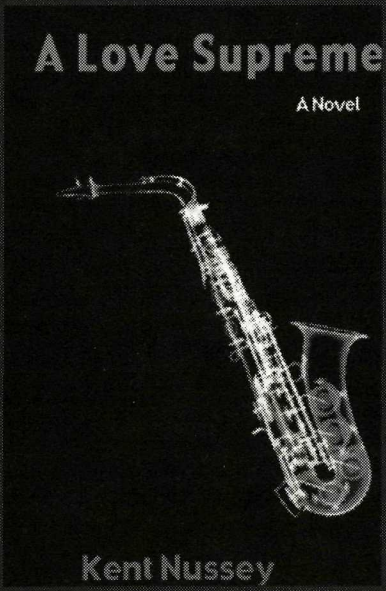

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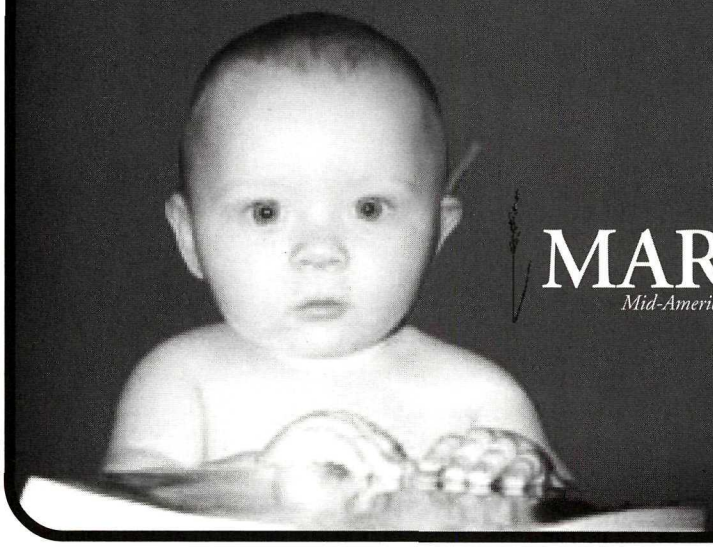

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42:3

Did religion have anything to do with a soft warm mouth, a simple rhythm? I felt acknowledged—a combination of being seen and seeing at the same time. Like I was hanging from the hoop, but now it wasn't asphalt below me, but prime polished hardwood, a roaring crowd.

—Adam Honsinger, Page 22

bill bisset
Jon Eben Field
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