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Contemporary Writing from Canada and around the World

PRISM international

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E-mail: prism@interchange.ubc.ca
Website: prism.arts.ubc.ca

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Contents

Volume 41, Number 3
Spring 2003

Drama

Donn Short
Full Frontal Diva / 46

Poetry

Steven Heighton
Three Approximations / 9

Gordon Mason
Virgin and Child / 25

Adam Chiles
Labour / 26
Helen / 27

Eve Joseph
Four Ghazals / 36

Camillia Matuk
The Middle of Orange / 40

Tanis MacDonald
Edison's Elephant, 1903 / 44

Daniel Tobin
Times Square Store, Brooklyn, 1973 / 45

Fiction

Avital Gad-Ckyman
Once a Month We Play / 7

Seth Feldman
Decking the Heavy / 12

Leah Bailly
Away With Us / 28

Contributors / 64

Avital Gad-Cykman

Once a Month We Play

The donkey brays behind the guard's shack, once again challenging the myth about roosters being the first to tear the silence of dawn. We often stumble over truths we once so dearly adopted. The farm animals' roles keep changing according to their preferences, for instance. We were wrong, wrong, wrong, to think that all donkeys or all roosters share the same nature.

Sometime between the war's first and tenth year, we understood that nothing could surprise or disappoint us, as long as we did not change our perception of it. Objects had mostly corresponded to our expectations. Yet, when our mothers came for a visit and released their sharp tongues, we came to realize that the Russian Babushka dolls standing on our TV sets were no longer brilliant red, green, yellow and brown, but were merely reminding us of their origins through their fading paint, keeping the colours alive. We revealed that newly found awareness to our mothers, who kissed us, and blessed us, and cried. They suggested we take off the mirrors and hang pictures of our husbands in their place.

When they left, we replaced our husbands' pictures with images of our youth. This way, we knew, our innocence would remain eternal. We are strong as one. Even while lying alone in a bubble bath, we go on referring to ourselves in the plural, as "we," and sometimes, "us." When we sing, our voices reach the skies. We are happy, happy, happy.

We are free to raise our children, while our husbands protect the borders of our land. Husbands move from one battlefield to another, under pressure to keep in motion. We would accompany them, but children are moving inside us and out and then off to their insecure ways. One may hang a line of dynamite over their necks, and they'll call it a necklace. We give them bronze soldiers and take them out to play. My son—no, we cannot say he is ours—he takes a step, placing his round, funny legs too far apart from one another, and he balances and hangs on to us. We love him so much. So much.

We love our sons and husbands so much, we build walls around our land, so nobody will get hurt. One brick builds a guarantee for peace, a thousand mark our skyline. We glue them with clay that sways like flesh and soon turns solid. Our home seems strong to us, although we are not sure how firm it is. Husbands see the walls moving, closing on them, and

they fire the guns, killing many husbands at a time.

Our strength still lies in our unique perception. The certainty of having survivors, husbands or otherwise, from the daily attack declines once we employ our knowledge of math. Instead, we focus on arts and entertainment. We celebrate the good life we have and the good years to come.

As years pass, we settle into odd numbers. Each of us young women has gone through the first year's mourning, the second year's recovery, an attempt at new relationships, and then nothing, or rather "something" that we can't capture with words. We tried "loneliness," "void," and "vacuum," but the words broke in toothy shards and lost all that had been whole and vital about them.

We meet once a month, every month, always. If someone is missing, we know she has died. We ask the neighbours to keep an eye on our kids, and we plead with our mothers to keep company with our lonely mothers-in-law. *They know how important it is; women cease to exist if they fail to* attend a meeting.

We are trimmer than we used to be, our nails are manicured and our hair is dyed with quiet colours so as not to suggest we have forgotten. We kiss each other's cheeks and dig into our satchels for our young husbands' bronze soldiers, the ones they played with as kids. Our children have their own. We place the soldiers over the floor, trying a different strategy every month. We do not care which side wins, because we belong to both. Bang, bang, bang. We laugh as we break each other's dolls and then we break ours. We remove the headless, broken soldiers from the field, and place new ones in their place.

Steven Heighton

Three Approximations

Like a Man

(Catullus)

Enough of this useless moping, Catullus,
it's over, write it off. Back then
when she was yours, the sun always shone
and you were on her like the sun,
insatiable, as she was, and she'll
never have it so good again.
Always at her heels, her side, or
inside her, Catullus, and that was
fine, whatever you wanted she wanted
and the sun—there's no denying it—
always shone.
Now she's changed, gone cold,
and you'll have to be the same—
not pitiful, like this, no whiner, idler,
sorry stalker, tavern fixture.
Take it like a man. So here's so long.
When Catullus makes up his mind, girl,
that's it. He won't come haunting
your doorway, nights, like love's hunched
beggar...but then again, who will?
Your nights will be as cold as his!
How will that suit you for a life?
Who'll come to see you then? Who
flatter you on your looks, give you
what he gave you all the time, and
take you around, kiss you,
be your fan? And you, girl—
who are *you* going to kiss,
yes, and bite...?
Ah, Catullus,
enough, you know it's over.
And you're taking it like a man.

My Marrow Flame

(Sappho)

He is not a hero, he is more
a god in my eyes, that man
who sits beside you, the one

close enough to hear each separate
word—your words—him lost in the pure
canto of your voice, the pour

and splash of laughter that makes my
blood bound fast. And when suddenly
I meet you, I can make no sound, my

tongue is helpless and my marrow
flame, my skin ablaze, I see
nothing and I hear no more

than the flood in my ears, that hard
drumming, as I drip with sweat
and I tremble. Then all the blood

drains from my face and I fade
to white, like winter grass.
Times like that
I feel death is not far from me—

The Sleep at Sea

(Homer, The Odyssey, Book 13, lines 76-93*)*

Now the crewmen sit to their oars in order and slip
the cable from the bollard hole and heave backwards
so their oarblades chop at the swell and churn up water
while over Odysseus sweet sleep irresistibly
falls so fathomless and sound it might almost be the sleep
of death itself.... And the ship like a team of stallions
coursing to the crack of the lash with hoofs bounding
high and manes blown back like foam off the summits of waves
lunges along stern up and plunging as the riven
rollers close up crashing together in her wake
and she surges on so unrelenting not even a bird
quick as the falcon could have stayed abreast....
So she leaps on splitting the black combers bearing
a man godlike in his wisdom who has suffered years
of sorrow and turmoil until his heart grew weary
of scything a path home through his enemies or the furious
ocean; but now he sleeps profoundly, with all his griefs,
asleep at his side, forgotten.

Seth Feldman

Decking the Heavy

Jimmy Burbank is surrounded by elk. In the dark, it is hard to tell how many. Some have antlers, some have very big antlers, some have no antlers at all. They don't seem to be grazing or, for that matter, fixed on his remaining headlight.

Burbank brushes aside the drapery of limp airbags and notices that one of them is stained with either his blood or his coffee. He remembers now that he swerved to avoid Magdalena the elk, hitting instead something even more substantial. Maybe the elk are here to thank him.

He turns the key. The tiny, glass-jawed car doesn't even groan.

His head hurts. He tastes blood.

With the passenger door open, he hears the clatter of hoofs on the empty mountain road. There's a faint smell like musty old furniture and a snort as if someone is playing a beer bottle. But no leaking gas, at least not that he can tell. Young Ernest the elk is working his snout through the open passenger door. Burbank undoes his seat belt, leans over, pushes Ernest away and pulls at the door handle. His collarbone tells him that this is a mistake. So does Ernest who is now playing a louder beer bottle. The door has no intention of returning to its frame.

Burbank remembers that there had been a construction detour. There were signs, arrows to follow. Then there weren't. He had kept going on the empty road hoping to pick up the trail. He'd been doing that for some time before Magdalena appeared.

Where is his omnipotent, state-of-the-art, global cell phone? He finds it, its face glowing, and calls 911. Nothing happens. There are still places that don't have 911. He pushes the operator button and gets a recording. Attila the elk kicks out the remaining headlight and, for good measure, most of the grill surrounding it.

Burbank pushes the buttons for Rocky's home phone. The wonderful global cell dials long distance. Four rings later, a cracked voice two time zones to the east shouts back to him.

"Who is this?"

"Rocky, you're a hunter. What do you do about elk?"

"You shoot them. Jesus, it's a quarter past four. Who is this?"

Burbank identifies himself and explains his situation. There is a long, tired silence.

"Okay," says Rocky, "this is what you do. You get out of the car and find the meanest male in the bunch, the alpha. He'll have the biggest antlers."

"Attila."

"Whoever. You go right up to him. You growl, stomp your foot and make lots of noise. If he's still not paying attention, punch him. Right on the nose. That's his most sensitive part."

"Yeah, then he'll tear me to pieces."

"With any luck."

Rocky hangs up. Young Ernest sticks his head back through the open door. Burbank feeds him a donut.

***

The donut shop looked like the last stop in the far western suburbs of the far western city. Burbank hadn't eaten since the plane. He ordered a dozen mixed and bought coffee in one of their plastic car mugs.

"Annie" the night counter girl could not have been friendlier. She wouldn't let him go until she found out where he was from and where he was going. She told him not to go there. Not that time of night.

***

The miniature car was not his idea.

Burbank had gone into the car rental. He rang the counter bell and eventually "Davy," appeared and asked what he could do for him.

It didn't seem to Burbank like there was a wide variety of goods and services on offer.

"A car," he said.

There were only two cars left, both of them designed to tell the world you don't rate an upgrade. He could have his pick. They were both green.

Burbank threw his driver's license onto the counter and, next to it, his wonderful omnipotent credit card painted to resemble an especially rare and precious metal.

Davy whistled.

"I guess you'll be wanting to waive the insurance."

"Kid," said Burbank, "if anything happens to a car I rent with this, we both get a new one. Hell, you get a trip to Hawaii."

***

By the time Carson had finished with Burbank, the airport was closed. Whoever the lodge had sent to meet him had long since left—as had the buses and taxis. Carson walked him toward the door while the other security guard turned off the lights.

"I'll run you into town," Carson volunteered. "Any hotel in particular?"

Burbank had no interest in a hotel. The studio had included a brochure

with his ticket. The brochure said the lodge was two hours from the airport. Tops.

"You got twenty-four hour car rentals around here?"

"A couple. But I don't think you should drive up there at night."

"Think I'll get lost?"

"That too. But it's more likely you'll hit an elk. There's a lot of them this year."

Once upon a time, Burbank proclaimed, the wolves ate too many elk and when there weren't enough elk left, died of starvation. This gave the elk their chance to produce too many offspring. Nature's purpose, he concluded, is to keep the vulture population more or less constant. Isn't it?

"Look," offered Carson, "I'm as tired as you are. If you don't want to go to a hotel, we have a guest room."

Carson's western hospitality was charming—bizarre, actually, coming as it did after he had hounded Burbank through the details of his identity, repeatedly grilled him on the offending incident and would not stop badgering him even in the face of incontrovertible proof of innocent intent.

All the while, they both knew it was nothing but practice, something to break the routine in a small city airport offering nothing of interest to the would-be air pirate. Carson was performing for his absentee boss or, who knows, the equally invisible instructor at Security Officers School. Carson's partner practiced on Burbank's suitcase.

"With all due respect, I think you're being foolish."

Carson said it again when he dropped Burbank at the car rental.

***

Inside the security guards' lounge—now the interrogation room—the guard who had stopped Burbank asked him for his name and photo ID. Burbank told him and, as he groped through his wallet, asked to whom he might be speaking to.

"Carson, Dick Carson. I'm the assistant head of airport security. And you, sir, may be charged with a felony."

"For what?"

"Uttering a death threat, impairing the security of an aircraft, air piracy."

Burbank thought "piracy" had a certain cache. He handed Carson his driver's license.

"I know who you are," Carson admitted.

Burbank smiled and struck the pose that was on the book jacket. Carson did his unsmiling thing.

"If you'd like a lawyer present, we can get you one in the morning."

***

Burbank had been the first one out of his seat, down the aisle and on the verge of exiting the aircraft. The pilot was standing just outside the cockpit door.

"You know," he said to the pilot and all within earshot, "I'd like to thank you for *your* patience. I would have killed somebody."

The pilot worked at keeping his smile. A flight attendant called security.

Meanwhile, Burbank dashed down the jetway. Whoever the lodge had sent for him might still be waiting. As he approached the exit, he could indeed see on the far side of the glass partition a man holding a small sign. Did it have his name on it?

Before he could be sure, an airport security guard stepped directly in front of him, another got a firm grip on Burbank's right wrist and twisted it behind his back. After just a bit of fumbling it was handcuffed to his left.

***

"Thank you for your patience," the pilot said. Burbank wondered who the hell was being patient. He and the rest of first class stewed in a silent haze. Cell phones were forbidden and, for security reasons, the pilot had turned off the handsets built into seat backs. Alcohol service was suspended. For their unconscionable fares, the passenger elite had been reduced to juice, coffee and as much of the nut *mélange* as they could eat.

His flight had just pulled away from the gate when the pilot announced the discovery of unaccompanied baggage in the cargo hold. After some time going nowhere, the airplane was escorted to a holding area. Then to a more distant holding area. Fire trucks arrived. Police arrived.

"Well," said the pilot, "at least we know the system works."

Eventually, an armored truck appeared and a man in a padded bomb suit made his way beneath the plane. Another half hour passed before the pilot announced that a cargo door appeared to be jammed.

Burbank had read every word of the in-flight magazine when he thought to ask a flight attendant why the passengers hadn't been evacuated. It wasn't part of the protocol.

***

"We can't just leave it like this," he said.

"It's left," said Bonnie. "There's nothing else you can say."

"When I get back..."

"I'll be gone."

***

Burbank didn't understand. Did they or didn't they want him to write the screenplay? Murray had a number of opinions.

"Come on, Murray, give me a straight answer."

"I don't know."

"That's your straight answer?"

"You've read the contract. The language about options. That's probably what they want to talk to you about."

"So what you're saying is that if I don't drop everything and rush off to this mountaintop lodge, I lose my option to write the screenplay?"

"That's the way these people do business. They need to know who they're dealing with. Lots of touchy-feely."

"Maybe the meeting is instead of my writing the screenplay?"

"I don't think so."

"But you don't know for sure?"

Silence. Out of the blue, he asked Murray if he'd ever actually read his fucking book.

"I know what it's about," Murray said.

***

Burbank had done two call-in shows, signings in four bookstores and, that evening, a motivational talk to a high school auditorium full of air cadets. His intention had been to order room service and fall asleep before it arrived. But when he finally closed his hotel room door, there was Asta, also standing on his side of it.

Big enough tits, he thought.

A short time later, she got out of bed without mentioning that it was the best sex she'd ever had.

This was when Bonnie called.

"I've thought about it," she said, "and I've come to a decision."

"A decision about what?"

"About Margaret. And the High Ceiling guys. Give them the whole fucking thing. Every last cent. Write a real book."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because this is your chance," she said, "to be a person. And you're not going to get many more like it."

"And what about the new house and the Mercedes and the shopping sprees?"

"I never asked for any of that," Bonnie said.

"Nothing that's happened matters?"

"Should it?"

"Look, I've got to go."

"Then go. But think about it."

Burbank was thinking about it when he and Bonnie heard the toilet flush.

***

Margaret sued. She didn't need the money. She just thought that there should be something she could do for those people who had been fired

from High Ceiling. Arnie's friends.

"Look," said the lawyer Murray had found him. "Even if you wanted to give her some money, you thought the best way to honor Arnie's wishes would be to keep to the original agreement."

"I have to swear to that under oath?"

"If it comes to trial. But my guess is that this is a nuisance suit. They think we're afraid of the bad PR and what they're really looking for is a settlement."

"Then settle."

"It's better if they initiate the process. What's really better is for them to beg."

***

Burbank couldn't believe the money. He deducted taxes and Murray's fee. He put some aside for Margaret. What the hell, Burbank gave her more. Lots more. After that, he couldn't believe how much was still left.

"And I get to keep it? Even if they don't make the film?"

"Yes," said Murray. "I told you that."

"Tell me again."

"This is what you get even if they don't make the movie. If they do make the movie, you get more."

How much more? Burbank was too giddy to ask. He asked anyway. Murray told him.

"And I get to write the script?"

"You get to write *a* script. Which they will buy from you."

***

Murray Pellow extended his hand and Burbank was thrilled to shake it. He'd had agents before. He had dumped them. They had dumped him. None of them had been Murray Pellow. Pellow was the top. The top of this particular office tower. The top of the pile. Figurative. Literal. The works.

"Please sit down."

Pellow offered him a drink, a coffee, funny coffee if he wanted. Burbank asked for the plain black coffee he thought he could handle. In a moment, a tight skirt moved by his face mixing the smells of fresh coffee and receptionist.

Burbank knew nothing about what was going on except that the royalty cheques kept getting bigger. They had stopped being cheques from High Ceiling and were now cheques from Cudleigh Snelgrove, a company so big it was owned by something even larger.

"And they bought High Ceiling?"

"You didn't know? They did it to get your book. They've junked the rest of the press."

"The book is that good?"

"Outstanding. Across two of the prime male demographics."

"So I get another book contract?"

"You get to publish whatever you like. As of now, everything you touch is 'by the author of.' New manuscripts. Old manuscripts. Short stories. Your good-sex-beat-the-stock-market diet. Whatever. It's a classy way to clean out your desk."

Pellow snapped his fingers between each item. It sounded like a string of firecrackers. Burbank had always wished he could do that.

"But none of it will make any money," Pellow continued. "Where the real money comes from is the paperback rights and the movie contract."

At the phrase "real money" Burbank's eyes started crawling from picture to picture on Pellow's wall. In all of them, Pellow was shaking hands with clients. Most were recognizable faces and some had names that had been extended with an "-esque" here, a "-like" there and maybe even an "-ism."

Pellow noticed Burbank's interest.

"Shall we take a picture?"

***

He held the newspaper in front of his face. He held it so long that the bottom of the paper, having dipped into his bowl of coffee, was sporting a brown stain and the stain was growing, larger and upward. Burbank's hands may have been trembling.

The name and the book were his. And they were not at number ten on The List as befit a newcomer, an unexpected arrival, an event far more to be desired than a kick in the pants. The name and the book had come out of nowhere to land at number eight.

"Fiction. James Burbank. *Decking the Heavy.* Number Eight."

"Yes," Bonnie responded from behind the Travel Section, "I saw it."

Burbank lowered the Entertainment Section directly into his bowl of coffee.

"You saw it?"

***

He came home to find Bonnie back from the office. It must have been later than he thought.

"I hope you've brought dinner," she said.

No, he had been at the copy shop with the last of the manuscript and then he'd gone to the post office to mail it.

"Which one was that?"

"You know which one. The one I've been working on for the last five months."

"The boy's story. By 'Jimmy Burbank?'"

"It's not a boy's story."

"No? Clench-jawed pilots, do or die? And the women who lust for their ever-youthful bodies? You sure you haven't brought dinner?"

"No I haven't brought dinner," Burbank snapped.

She sighed.

"All right, it's great literature. And you've done your good deed for Margaret and poor Arnie. Can we go out to celebrate? Like, soon?"

***

Mitch Curtis, the middle-aged boy executive learning to be a man, is in the co-pilot's chair next to old Charlie Bishop, our hero's hero. Charlie had blown his career while Mitch was still busy teething. Now a veteran captain for the world's scumbag freight services, he is the only guy Curtis and the network can find to land the heavy on a carrier's deck. Even Charlie had second thoughts—until Mitch's boss, the reptilian Farley, alluded to the three marriages Charlie had going on three different continents.

That's many chapters back. Here on the last pages, they are flying on this clear morning over the Barents Sea, half an hour out from beautiful downtown Murmansk. Well below and dead ahead, right there, if it is not entirely an illusion, sits a rectangular speck.

They have done this a hundred times in the simulator. Still, Mitch can't believe he is lowering the flaps.

The wheels come down. Then, at Charlie's nod, they lower the huge tail hook, groaning, creaking, shaking the 400 tons of airplane as if they're opening the gate of hell.

Charlie's hand is feathering the throttles, bleeding yet more of their airspeed. He's daring the stall alarm.

It is only now that Mitch notices Charlie's jacket, the pilot's jacket of a once great airline long since gone bust. He knows it is Charlie's first jacket, clean as it had ever been and never fitting him better.

Down there on the trembling blue carpet, the speck has grown. Off to the side of it is another speck, the company yacht, where Farley, the other network execs, the admirals, the Russians, the bankers and Congressman are watching. Connie is watching. She is the only one sitting on the great curved horizon who knows why they are going through with this. The fake footage is in the can. No matter what happens, that's the show going out in prime time.

"It matters that it doesn't matter."

The speck has become the rusted hulk of the *Vakulinchuk*, with the network's newly painted logo spanning the flight deck. It is a ghost ship. If there are Russian sailors who could be paid enough to stay on board, they are below decks bracing themselves behind something solid.

Mitch arms the retro rockets. The carrier is racing up toward them like a high fastball pitched by a tidal wave. One buzz of the stall alarm. Charlie

just thinks about touching the throttle and the alarm goes quiet.

In that quiet, Mitch hears himself ask the pilot, "What do you think, Charlie, can a 747 really land on a carrier?"

That might be spray on the rattling windows.

Charlie is no longer talking.

***

It was Rocky's address book that decked the heavy. Rocky had given Burbank the names of the more original thinkers on High Ceiling's list.

Burbank sat through long, rambling telephone calls, got ten thousand word e-mails and invitations to go up in things that didn't really look like airplanes. A man drove for two days to deliver crumpled rolls of indecipherable plans. Bonnie found him peeing on her shrubby and called the police.

Bit by bit, though, Burbank's engineering team redesigned the 747 for its mission. They came up with a credible tail hook, anchored it where the belly tank had been and moved the belly tank into the passenger compartment. They would land hot but as soon as the tail hook engaged, would fire retro-rockets to break the plane's speed. The fuselage would be reenforced. So would the carrier's deck and arresting cables. If he had to, Burbank would take down the island. But, as it turned out, the Russians had a half-built carrier, *The Grigori Vakulinchuk*, that had been sitting in Murmansk dry dock since 1991. It had no island and the network could lease it for a song. The Russians could keep whatever was left of the 747.

In the end, it all worked. Rocky allowed that he'd be damned if he could see why it wouldn't. Asta, the book's publicist, got real engineers and even real pilots to say "maybe" and "who knows?"

***

Burbank called Boeing, popped the question to a guy who designed the things.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Why can't it be done?"

"Off the top of my head? A 747's wingspan is too wide. Its wing tip would clip the carrier's island.

"Island?"

"The control tower. You know, that big thing sticking up on the deck."

"Go on."

"Well, the stall speed's too high. The plane would stall before it slowed down enough for a carrier landing. You would have to go in very fast, and given the sheer inertia, you would need a tail hook the size of a construction crane. And I'd like to see the arresting cables that would hold it. Even if they did, the impact would tear the plane apart. You want another reason?"

"Sure."

"If you were still in one piece—and there is no way you would be—how do you get the plane off the aircraft carrier?"

"That's the Navy's problem."

"Which they would add to the list of ten other good reasons for not going along with the stunt."

"That it?"

"Most of it. If you want, I can give you some more technical reasons."

"That's okay."

"All right, then. And, hey, look, before I forget, give my best to Arnie."

"Arnie's dead."

***

There had to be a way to land a 747 on the deck of an aircraft carrier.

Rocky didn't think so. But if Burbank wanted to find out everything a 747 could or couldn't do, it would be right there in Arnie's book, *King of the Heavies.*

"He wrote a book on 747's?"

"You didn't know? Best thing ever written about them. And that's not me talking. Ask the guys at Boeing, ask the pilots. Best thing Arnie ever wrote and one of the best things we ever published."

"If you and Arnie knew it was impossible, why did you buy the idea for the novel?"

"Well," Rocky said, "I guess that's why they call it fiction."

***

The handwriting on the envelope was shaky, as if written by a child. There was no return address. Inside was a single page letter typed badly above Arnie's signature in the same shaky hand. Attached to the letter were two copies of a legal document.

The document was their deal, just as they had discussed it. It was signed by Arnie, by the business manager at High Ceiling Press, properly witnessed and notarized. Burbank was to sign both copies, get them notarized and mail one of them back.

Arnie's letter was an apology. Their word to each other was good enough. Never meant to imply otherwise. He trusted his friends. But he didn't trust anyone else. So this was the way he wanted it.

"P.S.," said the same shaky hand, "there is no way to land a 747 on the deck of an aircraft carrier."

What the hell did Arnie mean by that? Burbank phoned to find out.

Margaret's sister, Ellen, picked up on the other end. There was someone crying in the background. It was Margaret, discovering a new continent of grief. He and the sister listened.

"You may remember me, we met...I'm a friend of Arnie's...was. I'm just calling to..."

There was another pause.

"How did you know?" Ellen asked.

They had just gotten back from the hospital.

***

"You bitch."

She had told him that what was he was trying to do was to show Arnie up. Write the better book.

"Never mind that the poor man can't think straight. You've got to get the last hit. It's like the two of you have been doing this forever and now you can't stop. He enters a contest, you have to enter the same contest. He gets honourable mention and you start throwing furniture."

"I've won some."

"Isn't that nice. Shit, when he started seeing Margaret you had to come on to her."

"That was before I met you."

"And twelve years later he's still coming on to me."

"You play right along."

"That's what you do with two little boys."

This is when he called Bonnie a bitch.

"And you," she pronounced, "are Jimmy Burbank."

***

As soon as he began to write Arnie's novel, the plot began to change. Arnie's workaday pilot became a television vice-President who flew his own corporate jet. The eccentric billionaire who was to fund the aircraft carrier stunt became the network itself caught up in a high stakes rating game. Those high stakes bred corruption, temptations to fix or even stage the grand event. To extraordinary flying skills, he would add a moral dimension.

"And who's the love interest?" Arnie wanted to know.

"Another network exec. When we meet her, she's after his job."

"Big tits?"

"Big enough."

"They fuck?"

"Once. She tells him it's the best sex she ever had. Then we get the cock back into the cockpit. Don't worry, Rocky told me what you guys agreed on."

"You can't call him Rocky. Only his flying buddies call him that."

"He told me to call him anything I wanted. As long as I didn't confuse air speed with ground speed and kept it to one fuck."

Arnie paused. Something hurt.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Right as rain."

"And you're okay with the changes?"

Arnie barely nodded. He was busy dying and so it was almost like flying stories didn't matter.

***

"There's something we didn't talk about last time," Arnie said. They met in his hospital room and, as promised, Arnie looked like another man's corpse. "I don't want my name on this damn thing. I've never put my name on anything I didn't write. A bit late to start now, don't you think?"

"I don't want my name on it either."

"I knew you'd say that. So I'm thinking about a pen name. A one-timer. You got any ideas?"

"Something from aviation? 'Orville Lindburgh?' 'Wilbur von Richtoften?'"

"High Ceiling won't go for anything like that. What else?"

"Well, when you think about it, the book's just as much about television. Why don't we steal a name from TV?"

"Okay. What's a television name?"

"Ray Cathode? Cable Chanel? Buster Remote?"

"Come on, something that doesn't sound like we're fucking around. A real name."

They thought for a moment.

"What's that place," Arnie asked, "where they make TV? 'Beautiful downtown…'"

"Burbank?"

"Yeah, Burbank. John J. Burbank."

"Not 'John.' James. John is too 'John Doe.'"

"Okay, James Burbank. Fast Jimmy Burbank."

***

It would be more than a few weeks work. The "finished first chapter" wasn't even a first draft. Arnie's outline petered out long before the climax and his character profiles aspired to the two-dimensional. There was notebook full of half-ideas written by a fully distracted man.

***

"Okay," said Arnie, "enough chit chat. This is what I want to talk to you about. I have this contract. Not a big contract but not a bad one either. I'm not going to finish it. I want you to take it over."

"What do you mean you're not going to finish it?"

"Look at me."

"You don't look so bad."

"Fuck you. I look like three weeks of chemo that's not doing shit. And

wait 'till you see what six weeks of chemo looks like."

"You'll come through."

"I'm going to fucking die. All right. I'm going to die. You tell me different and I'll get someone else to write the book."

"What book are we talking about?"

"An airplane story. You know, for High Ceiling Press."

"I thought you were through with those guys."

"Yeah, I was. But they finally gave me what I wanted."

Arnie had wanted them to publish a novel, at least one, after all his books on famous airplanes.

"And I got a five grand advance. I get to keep that."

"Keep it all."

"That's not the way I want it. So shut up and listen."

Arnie was going to keep the advance and half the royalties. His co-author could have the other half and, oh yeah, the movie rights. Not that there would be any movie rights. Still, over time, the deal might be worth a few more bucks for each of them. It wasn't a bad story. Nor would it be all that much work. A month. Six weeks, tops.

***

"Margaret called today," Bonnie told him one night, after she'd cooked him a dinner, poured him a third glass of wine and paused long enough for him to realize she was pausing. "Arnie's sick."

"What do mean, sick? The flu?"

"He's got cancer."

"Where. What kind?"

"A lot of places by now. The bad kind. He's already in chemo, but he didn't want to tell anyone until they were sure."

"Sure?"

"Sure he's going to die."

There was something at the bottom of his wine glass. It needed careful scrutiny. For all he was worth.

At length, Bonnie interrupted.

"Talk to me."

"I'd better go see him."

"You'll put it off."

He got up and walked to the phone. Arnie was asleep. Margaret suggested that early afternoon might be a good time for a visit.

After setting a time with Margaret he went upstairs. He sat at his desk and imagined he was borrowing Arnie's sleeping mind. He looked for a way to describe what it was like, this thing, and damned if he didn't come up with some first rate metaphors. He should have made notes.

When he came downstairs he found that Bonnie had gone to bed and left him the dishes. Which he did.

Gordon Mason

Virgin and Child

I'm from Loughton. In Essex.
Went to Loughton Girls' Comprehensive school.
I did CSE Arithmetic, RE, History, and Sex Education,

but no one told me babies can bite with their gums!
Sometimes his toes turn up when he's fast asleep.
Real fatty, isn't he.

And did my mum believe me when I said I was pregnant?
Did she believe me when I said no I hadn't had sex?
Our headmistress went berserk.

The girls in my class were dead jealous though.
He's got the same colour of hair as me, hasn't he?
I could gobble him up, I could.

When I remember that journey down to Gatwick!
What a nightmare! We had to sleep in the departure lounge.
One-armed bandits and video games going all night long.

And that's when this one chose to be born.
Next thing I know, three blokes off a Middle-East flight
giving him presents. Bar of this. Box of that. Jar of the other.

I'm going to make sure he's got a trade though.
Got a trade, got a living I say.
My best friend said—what if he'd been a girl?

And I said—what if I'd been a virgin?
We laughed!

Adam Chiles

Labour

From the hospital roof
I cannot distinguish the light
of stars from live
planets. When I look up
each point speaks the same
dogged jargon.

Staring from a thousand feet
at the map of Albuquerque.
I believed each light
gossips for us.

Every night re-entering
my own tamed acre
of moon. I stare at
the neighbors across
the lawn and wave
as I turn the door knob
and go inside.
How private we are.

From the hospital roof
I can hear the traffic slowing
along Robson Street.
My wife has finally
passed out.

Holding a cigarette
in my right hand.
I have added this much
to the world.

Helen

Below me, tools insist
a plain song. Nails enter

the hulls of grounded trawlers.

A pleasant sound,
the hour mending

itself again.

I sit above the harbour
with my sandwich

and think of the needle
as it enters you.

London flutters
just below your skin.

Another may have
thought it better to

slow-dance their way
down, one bottle at a time.

You want it all though,
the sensate charge

pressing its lip on.

The faceted light
that extends like

a Byzantine alley
through you.

Leah Bailly

Away With Us

Grandpa is in the corner on his knees. Facing out. Cupped in his left hand is a bowl, swinging so delicately to and from his lips it is as if someone has glued it to his hand. His chopsticks are a shelf, or a shovel, pushing rice in and in. Not eagerly. His belly sighs up and down with his shoulders in such small movements one can hardly tell it is breath. He must be listening to Popo. He is. Popo's toes come in and out of view, her pulled-up socks, and Popo is always muttering or shouting or twittering or laughing or reciting her round words to Grandpa. He doesn't always nod. There are times his eyes crinkle, but there are times when they are still.

I cannot see past their knees, but I can look Grandpa straight in the face. Popo is folding *har gaus* on the far counter. I can see her rock calves squeezed into woollen socks. Her ankles rooted into the linoleum. I hear murmurs in Cantonese from Popo's helpers; three ladies in aprons and fold-over skirts. Never louder than Popo. Their legs stand stiff beside Popo's now. Eight trunks for spindly, bending trees but narrowing at the bottoms. Right where they should be thick and strong. They shift their weight from one balled foot to another, pushing their soles out flat. Their hands above them must be sticky with dough and shrimp.

I am stretched out. My nose is smunched into a carpet so musty that the smell makes my whole face twitch until my eyes well up. My cheek must have grooves, imprinted lines down one side. With my legs splayed out behind me and my face poking through the grate, I can see right into the kitchen, glimpse Grandpa between shuffling legs.

There are hundreds of portholes connecting the rooms in this creaky old house. Popo's mansion is the tallest house in Chinatown, maybe even the tallest in Cobble Bay, and I'm sure the house once belonged to a diplomat or a tea dealer. Now, the house marks the entrance to the warehouse district, where the foul odours from the cannery meet the clangs and whirs of harbour cranes. Now, the house's cedar frame splinters into its old clay foundation. Paint-stripped. Sagging. Dilapidated.

Popo was the one who gave me my dictionary, *The Oxford Concise*, so I could use my language to its full potential. This is important to Popo, like celebrating birthdays. Neither Popo nor Grandpa remember their birthday dates, nor their astrological signs, which has left them at a great disadvan-

tage. I, however, am truly shaped by my stoic Capricornian nature, my ample vocabulary, and my two dead, shrivelled legs.

"HEY, MER. YOU CRAWL DOWN THOSE STAIRS?" My belly seizes. My arms push my chest off the ground and I give him a look with my meanest fibres. Joshua is a fat lazy Aries, loud as a midway.

"Joshua." My neck strains all the way up to where he stands, out of reach, above me. "Get lossst."

"AT LEAST LEMME HELP YOU BACK UP." Joshua doesn't always understand things on the first try. This may eventually lead to Joshua's downfall. He can't take a hint.

"Go fuck yourself, Joshua." He doesn't listen and steps over my outstretched body. His legs make a V over the backs of my knees. I can't turn over without lifting one leg over the other. He knows this. My head cranes around wildly. My snapping turtle. With these shrunken legs I am powerless to kick. To hop up. To run away. He knows this too.

"C'MON, MER. ALLEYOOP!" Joshua guffaws. Picks me up by my hips, flips me over, and carries me up the stairs like a bride. Almost knocks my face against the banister. The bastard.

I spend hours following them around the house with my ears. Behind the flapping walls of a canvas tent. Beyond the hum of the humidifier. The creak of the metal.

At the end of each day, the ladies file past the kitchen swing-door, past the bottom banister, under the giant crêpe-paper lantern and out through the front door to catch their buses. This is Popo's way of showing respect for her employees, allowing them to begin and end their shifts by entering the same way our guests do. Through the foyer and out the main door. A bell chimes behind them when the door clicks shut.

Popo wears flip-flops and socks and, when her mouth isn't popping out clippy orders to the others, her walk-shuffle sounds around the house are kih-shhhh kih-shhhh soft, like wind through sorghum. Grandpa's footfalls are clunkier with gumboots on, but padding silent with his bare feet. This makes him undetectable when he climbs the stairs, except for his shallow nose-breathing. The gardener cannot climb the stairs without clicking his trophy ring against the banister, and my half-brother Joshua cannot move or breathe or exist without snotting and snorting and drooling. He has no desire to disguise his movement around the house. Joshua is so obvious. Boorish. Elephantine.

I can do silent somersaults alone in this room. I can handspring and flip and karate chop right out of the metal braces and the canvas tent and even these atrophied calves. I can leap right out of them when I'm alone. Even dive-roll out the window. Even sail on clouds.

***

Grandpa sweeps the veranda with his straw broom. His tire-tread sandals slap the ground as he hums, right below my window, as if in greeting. He reaches way up and beams through the walls of my tent. Radiates. Illuminates. Grandpa has so many ways of relaying these messages to me, but Grandpa has never spoken a word of English to me in my life.

Grandpa's youngest son, Duncan, Joshua's father, slept in this room. The room with the puckered paper and sloped walls. There are twenty-nine rooms in the whole house, plus the cold storage basement with the meat slicers and giant sacks of white rice. More than just a house, this is a buzzing factory-mansion. The stairways are narrow and windows open but only stay up with a stick. In Cobble Bay, the pillars in the front aren't unusual, just unpainted. The smell of the cannery and the grease from the wharf have rotted the paint around the windows into a dingy brown-yellow.

The master bedroom has cracked mouldings and the front hall has a high ceiling and some stained glass, but the true wonder is the kitchen. Our kitchen consumes most of the main floor and the dining spaces, and carries all the old smells from the house and the family. We even have a whole room of ovens and proofers and, I admit, I have threatened Joshua with a night in the oven if he doesn't behave.

As far as I can tell, our main floor is the biggest dim sum factory for a thousand miles. Dim sum means, "to touch your heart." Little morsels through the stomach. Small steamed and fried treasures for the tummy and the soul. This city is in love with Popo's dim sum. They buy freezer bags for their restaurants and cases for their homes.

The workers here are hired without papers, and I imagine part of their clipped Cantonese welcome speech must be something about me. "There is a girl," Popo would explain, "a white girl upstairs with metal legs. Don't look at her funny, she is our family. Ask no questions." And I'm sure they would pass the gossip on to one another on the first bus ride home. The poor abandoned child, all sick limbs and sick lungs. Poor thing. Poor thing. How did she come to be with this family? Poor thing. What does she do?

Backflips, I could tell them. I do backflips for breakfast. I lie here in my bed and do kung fu moves like king's crown: three swords, one hand overhead, one right at your throat. That's what I do. I read the dictionary and J.A.G. Robert's *Concise History of China* and I make things symmetrical and I hate my half-brother. That takes up a lot of time. My teeth click patterns. My shoulders move in shapes. I listen and follow the others with my ears. Dim sum smells flow in and out of me all day and I eat it all night in my dreams. I can see a window through a tear in the tent walls. I can handspring right through it, from bedside-table, to lampshade and out onto the cannery rooftop. And I am never bored.

Joshua and I play gin rummy until dusk. I win thirteen games with three double gins and only two runs. I rule. Dominate. Subjugate. We alternate sides every two hands to keep my back from tensing up. Each of my legs is screwed into a bendable, extendable brace that keeps them from shrinking back into my hip sockets like turtle heads. My legs are always a little apart, in half-straddle, and always elevated to keep blood from pooling and my tendons from calcifying. Every four hands, Joshua turns the little crank at my side and bends and flexes my legs at the knee. This whole contraption was Grandpa's idea. To reduce atrophy. Popo calls atrophy the dry poppy effect, but the Cantonese left over in her tongue makes it sound like *dlie poppy*. Popo says my non-Chinese tongue could learn Cantonese, but I should spend time with my English dictionary instead. English isn't round and spiky like the peony though, sweet and smoky like *cha siu bau*.

The chimes dance at the front door. The ladies scuttle to their bus to scoot them home to their own rice bowls. The house is calm except for the gardener, who whistles as he performs the special watering ritual of late evening. Popo knocks. Tray full, teapot full. She sets it on the round table in the corner by the window. This is our dinner: black beans and broccoli and rice. We tap three fingers in thanks for the tea, and Popo kow-tows as she leaves the room, smiles at our little game. Popo eats downstairs on her kitchen table rough with gouges so she may feed Grandpa, crouched quiet beside the ovens.

That night, I dream our mother dines with us. The mother Joshua and I shared. Blonde hair to her waist, but not like silk. Like noodles. She doesn't know to leave the fish head, not to turn it over on its platter. She touches me but not Joshua. Between her teeth hang strips of food that wiggle over her gaping mouth. Her face is my face. *Guei po.*

Grandpa is standing over me. My forehead, my armpits, my tailbone are all on fire and my throat burns from hacking. The canvas tent is full of foul odour, only obvious to me once the cold air from the hallway hits my lungs. It feels like a punch, and the cough grips my throat. Grandpa holds me like a baby. He rushes down the hall. My heave starts, ripping the cough through me and tearing flesh. It must be tearing. I must have been calling out. Grandpa must have heard from all the way downstairs.

The bathroom walls drip and the wallpaper melts into pools around the base of the toilet. I hang suspended over the bowl; Grandpa has me by the ribs, leaning back against my weight. More ripping, a hacking cough. Droplets of blood bloom in the bowl, full and red as Popo's dahlia. My legs curl underneath me, return to a fetal state, and my hair runs into my tears, run into my spit, run into my phlegm in one long stream. Grandpa will not

lose his grip. He chants some indecipherable something until eventually the heaving ceases.

Joshua's toes under my toes, one strong hand under my belly. I'm flipped over Joshua's shoulder, my head upside-down and a round pattern is rubbed into my back. All I can hear is the rattle in my lungs. Pounding in my temples. We stand like this, with me slung over Joshua's shoulder for a long time before Joshua sends Grandpa to bed with a few short commands in Cantonese. Grandpa kow-tows to both of us, backs out of the room.

"How do you know that?" I am hoarse. My voice is not my voice. "How come they teach you those words. How do you know so much?" I raise my voice, shout into his back.

"MER, C'MON." His hand is at the base of my neck, softly resting my head on my pillow.

"Because you go into the kitchen, and they let you help? Because you're half, right? Because you have the blood or something?"

"MER, IN THE MORNING." His eyes are puffed around the bottoms and I notice they really look slanted like that. His eyes are stuck on a spot beside my cheek. A brown-red stain on a pale blue pillowcase. "GOODNIGHT." Joshua draws the canvas tent around my bed. Draws the curtains over the window. Switches off the light.

"Fuck you, Josh. C'mon." He has left the door ajar, but he is already halfway down the hall.

Joshua and Grandpa share blood. It was Duncan, Joshua's father, who lived in this room. It is the Cantonese in him. The Cantonese that got in my mother. My mother doesn't live in Cobble Bay and neither does Duncan and neither does my father, for that matter. I have never heard anyone speak of him. Not out of secrecy but ignorance. He is a mystery. Like how Popo got this house.

Duncan and my mother met in jail. Or rehab. Or wherever a long tall Chinese man puts poppy-seed stains up and down a blonde lady's arm. Baby-sits her kid while she's out with other men. I remember a few apartments, some carpet. A foam couch where Duncan and I would sit side by side and watch Highlander. Drink tea.

We came to visit the big house a couple of times after Joshua was born, snot-nosed me in tow. Popo was thrilled by the way I ate her sesame seed balls, a big greasy clown smile taking up half my face. My mother held Joshua while she picked at her lunch, poking white slimy dumplings with a chopstick and scowling.

One afternoon my mother decided to ditch baby Joshua with Duncan and took me for a mad getaway. I remember a car ride with a thick-armed man and my face pushed up against a ripped plastic seat as I tried to sleep. I kept asking if the baby was hungry at home, where Duncan had pulled

the blankets off the bed and made a nest on the couch. I kept waking up from little backseat dreams, choking and crying. Guess I eventually pissed them off, so when we stopped for French Toast at a diner in Coal Sound she sat me down outside with a kitty while the waitress watched me, just for a minute. Guess a lot of time passed. When the waitress asked me for a number I could call, all I could remember was Popo's factory name. *To Touch Your Heart.*

Joshua was already waiting there for me. Duncan had dropped him off at Popo's house. No milk to feed him and he wouldn't stop wailing. Such a loud baby. Clangourous. Deafening.

I wake to bells, light as sprinkles, and pattering footsteps. The noise downstairs begins long before they pull the tent open and smile me good morning. I can track them with my ears. It starts with the bells. *Mud liu?*

There are piles of lotus leaves. Those must be sorted.

There are pots of rice with stones. Which must be rinsed.

There are shrimps in buckets, all moving legs. We must remove the veins.

Cornstarch mixes with water mixes with flour mixes with sesame oil. Filled with filler. Coconut and honey and pork, extra sweet.

"HEY, MER, *HUA JUAN.*" Joshua has set us breakfast. Tea and flower buns; yeast and scallions. Sesame balls that are greasy and sweet. My favourite. Popo loves to watch me eat them, tells me to get fat and fat and fat. Red bean paste and rice flours. Deep deep fried.

Joshua gets sick of the sweet, but I could eat it everyday, and I do.

"Hey, Josh." Joshua looks at me blankly. "Josh!"

Joshua grunts a reply through a mouth full of dough. "Ever heard of the Boxers?" He looks at me sideways. "Okay, so there's these guys, the Boxers, that taught martial art as a way of rebelling."

I begin with my explanation. Even though Popo trusts him to walk into town alone, buy her baskets and my clothes, and even trusts him enough to go to the Mardona Straight Middle School alone every day, Joshua is an extremely dense individual. I explain things slowly to Joshua. "And healing," I continue.

"YEAH, SO..." His mouth is full of sticky rice.

"They rebelled with meditation."

"WHERE?"

Sigh. I sigh. "North. North of Tianjin. Late nineteenth century. But they weren't all guys. There were these girls, the Red Lantern Society."

He stops chewing, his mouth hanging open with round balls of bun visible on his tongue. "COOL."

"Close your mouth. And not just cool. They rode on clouds. They could meditate through all torture. And they fought."

"DID THEY WIN?"

"Not really, but they kicked ass. They flew and rode dragons and—"

"WAIT A SEC."

"No, Josh, they could suspend themselves on ropes and trees and—"

"MER, I CAN'T TEACH YOU KUNG FU, OKAY? I CAN'T, YOU CAN'T EVEN STAND. C'MON."

"My arms are strong. And Grandpa is showing me—"

"MER, YOU CAN'T DO KUNG FU."

"But Grandpa's old and—"

"YOU CAN'T EVEN GET OUT OF BED, OKAY?"

"Fine."

Who needs to stand for kung fu? All you need is razor-sharp wit. And God, Joshua is no master. Stupid classes at the cultural centre don't mean anything. Just doing poses and chants. He loses every match. He must. Bunch of idiots, not thinking, just throwing punches and kicks around like juggling oranges. Dropping them all over. Careless. Idiots.

I take more bites of my sticky rice and leave my sausage for Joshua. So he'll get fat and slow. Joshua the deceiver. The impostor. The half-breed.

Popo reads my tea leaves. We sit at her rough cutting table. Joshua has carried me down, left us to run errands. The smoke shop for pork, the wharf for fresh squid. Popo says I am blessed to stay at home—the smell of the pork house makes you gag. We laugh. Popo sticks her finger in her mouth and makes rough sounds. She smiles when I smile.

Our chairs pushed together, my legs are out of the cage and stretched out on her lap. I can see my legs are as long as her arms now, that they are shrinking back into me, sucked in from the inside. She reaches across and rubs ointment into the joints at my hips. Little drops of oil seep into the straps of my underwear. Popo's medicine. The jar on the table with floating leaves and twigs that smells like booze and turns my skin cold and prickly. She looks deep into the jar of herbs for a pattern, like with the leaves. The jar sits between us on the table and through the brown liquid Popo's face is rounded out in the front. One eye catches mine, slanted. Her brow is knitted tightly. Popo looks scared.

Grandpa cries out. It is just before dinner, the grey sky darkening. I am waking from a nap. The tent is tight around the bed, but I can construct the scene without seeing. Popo's voice. Shrill and high and calling for help. Joshua is beside her. Popo's head is on Grandpa's chest. Her lips still moving. Joshua leans in. The help surrounds them. I should be there too.

I drag my dead weight across the floor to the window. From above, Grandpa's body looks like it has fallen from a great height. Small rivers from the evening watering run in the cracks of the bricks around his

collapsed body.

Grandpa is not breathing. If he was, he would be up by now. That was Grandpa, never down for more than a second. Was. He's not breathing, he's not breathing. Repeat. Call someone. My arms burn from holding my weight on the window sill. Joshua looks up, sees me in the window. Sends a worker to come get me. Carry me down to see for myself.

Five minutes pass and no one has come. They hover over Grandpa still and Grandpa is still unmoving. I call down. Someone has called an ambulance. Joshua wants to pick him up but doesn't. Is not allowed. Tears pour down my face and my chest starts to constrict. Sobs form with the cracking of a cough. The scene is out of reach but I cannot let go of the sill. I cannot look away.

Popo is silent. I have never before seen Popo silent. The help bring her a chair and the gardener is giving instructions to paramedics. Paramedics have entered the house and I didn't even hear the bells at the door. They all speak to these men in broken English while Joshua translates. Instructions for when Grandpa wakes up in the hospital and cannot speak to the doctor. I squelch another cough. If he wakes up. A siren calls up to me, long and shrill, and finally I drop to the floor. My tailbone lands hard on the metal braces I have dragged across the room.

Grandpa has found some sort of quiet in this house. He lies in a bed in the room beside mine. Popo has bathed him so he may become an ancestor. Popo is all in white. Joshua and I lunch on bamboo shoots and rice wine. We listen to Popo whisper through the walls. Joshua tries loudly for some kung fu talk. I cannot play. He even brings up the Boxers. Poor Josh. He hates himself for not helping.

Joshua carries me into Grandpa's room where Popo sits in the corner and reads. Again, silent. I look again for Grandpa's chest moving, easily, like before. Joshua pulls closer. I put my hands on Grandpa's ribs. His skin has dropped away. Lies in pools on either side of his eyes.

Grandpa on his back on the bed. There are others in the room, scurrying around. I can't see past their hands. I can look Grandpa straight in the face. The sound of feet scuffing the carpet is like breath. Joshua breathes heavy behind my neck. I breathe with him, long and slow. We breathe for Grandpa. Grandpa is outside. High high, back-flipping over the creaking cranes. Hand-springing down a Chinatown street, off the Cannery roof. Double-flipping onto the closest cloud.

Eve Joseph

Four Ghazals

XX

Sunday morning. The Priest's robe
has native designs:

raven, eagle: a frog
with tiny human hands.

I want the merciful re-telling:
a whisper always blood.

Mother coasting on the couch.
Tracks. Late last night

the fishing boats returned.
Goose moon. Next month, Frog.

What starts heavy, needs
to lighten. In the kitchen sink

an ice-cream bucket of blackberries:
a permanent stain.

From his pulpit it's that raven
proselytizing yet again.

XXXIV

Late fall, frogs announce
it is time to dance.

Are those men or ghosts
circling the fire?

I doubt what I know,
not what I hear: old songs

rise from the burnt church,
not hymns but hunting songs.

Was it madness to let her sleep
on the grave? Madness to drag her off?

Always the river, its secrets:
an osprey hooked: a terrible kite.

Her Indian bread was so fine
we called it cake.

XLIV

I've stolen my own rituals: notes
are missing. Whole songs forgotten.

On my wrist, a raven feeding
on spirits. What to make of this?

A hand reached through pain
to a stone temple. A bell. A winter wren.

Wind. Breath. It seemed the whole
world waited on this death.

Around the shed, a string of unlit lanterns:
small fires in the sky.

Fear darkens the room: a candle
helps. And touch.

Today I move against the current;
even a short crossing takes longer.

October 3rd. Grateful for the late sun:
the last, unhurried bees.

XLV

November 5th. The rivers are rising;
instinctually, we edge closer to home.

One body, they rise: drop
back to earth. To these fields.

Don't confuse me for the angel
of death. Clearly, I lack the conviction.

The dugout is all we have left: that
and a memory of fire.

Think of them as snow birds:
small white fidelities;

what breaks through ice rises:
a song, a spirit song.

It is here I release the dead:
navigators on a starless night.

Camillia Matuk

The Middle of Orange

The Far

Pan-Wei, her father, calls her number two, the second daughter of seven. A line of girls, and overlooked, but two is lucky and when she becomes seventeen, an ocean grows between them. He lets her search the places across it, from where foreign businessmen come wearing ties and trading sums. He sends her to live with the nuns, and tells her to remember her ancestors, Shu-Hung of the forests, Choi-Wan who raised the clouds and the nameless who came before him and who stare at the sticky buns on their shrines, wooden-mouthed in frames. And her two brothers, younger than her, who will pass on the family name and whose children will call him Gung-Gung. He gives her a watch so she will know when to return. When to leave. The nuns who baptize her with an English name swear in the ash of cigarettes behind corners when they think the girls are in their dorms. Later, she will understand. Later, when she learns to speak.

Visitors from before

They come from the sky from places in stories from flashes on TV and the phone calls after eleven. They come with pink plastic bags of waxy ginger and twisted ginseng root, ground deer horn and dried roses in jars. They exchange tiny red envelopes bulging with money, pinching the corners between thumbs and fingers and say "kung hei fat choi." And when they open their suitcases, their clothes breathe halos of the fish markets, of the pharmacies, of the air that travelled with them. Shreds of moments hoarded, dissipating in the western spaces. They look at her fireplace and her deck and the garden in the backyard, and at us, their nieces. They sit counting and dividing the oranges between them and comment on fresh beginnings. These absences of smells.

When she learns to speak

She fears answering machines, her voice replayed and imperfect. Endings too clipped and R's too big to curl her tongue around. She confuses boys with girls and people with tables and chairs and we have to translate this side of the world to her. But seeing the time, she leaves and sends us tissue paper letters. Pulpy and delicate from the rain. Dripping words, the shadows of ink, of her home we never knew, that place where her daughters are foreigners. Overlooked. We used to laugh at her shame, her extra L's where ours should be.

Returning

The middle of orange and she hangs paper spells on the staircase before the door. Red to glance the dead unspoken. Charmed and under-eyed. Plump lids made fists when Gung-Gung lay behind glass, then beneath the earth his face sinking under the world. Waterfull. And she with her back turned to us, remembering the mole above his lip, the watch she still wears. How he ate congee every morning. Steamed flowers in tea, crushed paper buds. Seven hours in the cup unhandled, and the petals pulled apart. Emerging. Chrysanthemum quells fire, she says. Even over oceans. Numbers sound like words and fish are lucky and the youngest always pours the tea. The living dress in white when it ends, circling bridges, burning money for later. Sisters wait. On the seventh night, ancestors return with the wind to close doors. Light bulb stings. And they weep. No one remembers the fruit and it rots on the altar.

Tanis MacDonald

Edison's Elephant, 1903

Two men lead her on a rope that might
as well be a thread. She looks for the work
she expects to perform in harness, freight
to carry, flat-cars to pull, the jeweled howdah
to bear a woman who waves to the crowd.
The elephant's forehead is a triangle of bone,
a slipped crown. She bows her head, allows
her bridle to be staked to the ground, wires run
up her legs, her feet submerged in a pool,
six inches of water, no more. The men leave
and she waits for hay or work, her toes cool
in the water until her feet begin to crackle. She
peers through the smoke for the men who'll
rescue her from the fire in her legs until she
buckles, a mountain plummeting in the fog.

She falls on the rope; it breaks. She kicks out,
not like a beast of burden or might, but like a frog
under dissection, like an infant with colic at night,
like a dog tied behind a car and run to death. Now
Edison takes note of the exact voltage and current
necessary to electrocute one elephant cow,
twelve years old, three calves, much wood
and water carried. He discovers just how
to kill a willing giant, a great behemoth felled
by thought, and we are better for being repelled.

Daniel Tobin

Times Square Store, Brooklyn, 1973

(for S.C. and W.B.T.)

The last time I saw Mickey, he'd painted
his cheeks with blush, affected a passion
for opera. My father, unacquainted
with his best friend's son's adopted fashion,
stood, part shipman, part voyeur, words rolling
impotently off his tongue, while the gazes
of our fellow shoppers flashed controlling
signals down the aisle. The heart amazes
itself, in spite of where it's been created.
Hard-knocks in a cowed schoolyard, a doting
mother, the hang-dog look of the defeated,
weigh in balance between all and nothing:
those beatings that were his father's pleasure,
the other life that became his treasure.

Donn Short

Full Frontal Diva

Introduction

The following is an excerpt from the full-length play, *Full Frontal Diva,* wherein three men search their memories to tell the forgotten history of a young boy and the meaning of his life and death many years ago. The play was recently selected as one of two winners of the 2002 Writing Out Award, an international writing prize presented by the Finborough Theatre in London, for the year's best new theatre and film scripts on a gay and lesbian theme.

The playwright wishes to acknowledge the Playwrights Theatre Centre, Vancouver, BC, for its valuable contributions to the development of this play. The playwright expresses his thanks to Roy Surette, Bob Frazer, Robert Moloney, Andrew McIlroy, Roy Neilson, Aaron Bushkowsky, Stephanie Kirkland, Martin Kinch and Chapelle Jaffe.

As the lights come up, KENNY APPLETON, in his early 30s, stands at a doorway. His dressing area, which includes a table, chair, mirror and coat rack, is nearby. There is also a window.

APPLETON They found Jimmy McHugh's dead, wrecked body last week—on the third. I remember because that's usually *show* day. That's *Saturday* to you. I ran into him the night before, at a most *in*teresting establishment—I assure you. But he didn't even recognize me. Looked right through me. Maybe it was the outfit. People only see what they want to see, *I* say.

Since coming back to town for my little visit, I've tried to pick up the local dirt that doesn't make it all the way to the big city and, of course, Jimmy was at the very *top* of my list: so I'd heard the stories about too much drinking and hard living—although what's so hard about living?, *I* say—but I wasn't quite ready for that face. And, as he walked *right* by me without so much as an "excuse me," or a "kiss my foot," I thought to myself: *you know, you look ready to die*—but of course, he didn't have a clue.

It was the same deal with an aunt of mine: racked with cancer and everybody oblivious including the aunt.

So, except for that *minor* matter of the gash across his throat, maybe Jimmy McHugh went like everybody else after all. Laid out in his best "you may view the body now" suit—Zellers I think—so you know they really *pushed* on the budget … you re-e-e-e-ally couldn't even notice it. Leave it to East City to know all the tricks of too much make-up. Credit where credit is due, *I* say.

There've been three viewings so far and *another* one tonight. Lined up in the streets they are, waiting to get a peek. Why, I even caught Old Lady Grady tugging on Jimmy McHugh's collar just to get a better look. Apparently, it's become all the rage to run your finger along the stitches—and make a wish! Who knows *what* might happen tonight? You'll have to *pry* my fingers off the doorknob to get me out of there. Oh, yes, the violent end of Jimmy McHugh, dead at thirty-three, is news in every neighbourhood throughout tiny, bored East City—*and the place is packed!*

Paula Miller, the woman who *claims* to be the dead man's wife—without any *paper*work to that effect—but why quibble now, *I* say—was the *picture* of grief—in a black turtleneck. I don't know *how* she got that hair through the door without bending over, but I don't like to kick them when they're down. Poor dear, you can just imagine what she must be going through. She'll be just fine: everybody carries on after somebody, *I* say.

Jimmy and Paula lived in a spacious apartment at the end of a hallway—between "C" and "D." Although the letter on the door says—"A." Only the children much notice the faulty chronology—a chance to show off a school lesson in order and place, swallowed whole.

Those who came all the way over the Hunter Street Bridge from the sophisticated west side gave no such hint of even noticing. Oh, yes, they shrug off anything out of the ordinary with the same boredom and indifference that will eventually take them home again tonight. The thrill of ninety stitches stretches only so far. Or maybe they're just tired: life is such a chore when you have to give up a night at the Legion.

He moves away from the door toward his dressing area while taking off his sweatshirt.

In time, the whole city will have come to pay respects, or scratch a gruesome itch, whichever you prefer. Death puts on quite a show. The old, the young, the wanderers and the firmly-rooted, will all come. The rug merchant on Charlotte Street, who's spent twenty-eight years with the cheerleader he married six months after raping her ... and Maggie Hinton, who cured her husband of his roving eye by sticking a knife in it—during *Front Page Challenge*—will both come.

He pulls off his shoes.

Next to Jimmy McHugh's transgressions, their crimes are shadows, reflections, really, of not much at all. Through the years, this city has spent many long, endless nights reading about Jimmy McHugh's criminal escapades in the newspaper. Scamming U.I., stealing cars in Lakefield, and an endless series of you-can-count-on-them-being-bloody fist fights at some of our finest shit-kicker bars.

Oh, they condemned him, but always with a wink—you know, a secret admiration. All that male power, the electricity of his adventures—such a corpse must be properly mourned. A moment's silence please—that's enough.

The public is very predictable in its tastes, *I* say. And tonight will unfold like the previous three. So I know in advance: the old will leave first. After that, there won't be any particular order to the exodus. At the first viewing, three days ago now, Billy Taylor, an old sweetheart of mine, stayed just ten minutes—long enough to make it with me in the locked room next to the one where Jimmy McHugh had been laid out—plus another five to recite empty words of sympathy to Paula Miller. Billy Taylor, you bad boy. "*Can't quit* you *baby,*" he whispered in my ear—*and then left.*

Well! I said the same thing to *him* that I say to my girls the first night of a new gig: kisses on your opening, honey.

He takes off his socks and rolls them both neatly into a ball, dabs each cheek.

Paul and Frankie Morris! ... who were born brothers and lived their lives as brothers, but whose brotherly love now violates the normal rules of attraction in this little burg, were nothing but proper and polite— *"How do? How do? Nice to see you again, how do?"*—and had their own quiet, urgent reason to rush home ... *Petty* sins—I assure you—in a world once lived in by Jimmy McHugh. And that St. Pierre woman ... French ... mumbling to anybody who'll listen that she married beneath herself. So? All women *do.*

One by one, I study them all, their bloodthirst satisfied, eyes now only for the door, making their way down a hall of mirrors, distorted shapes retreating to the night outside: victims and survivors, those happy all the time and those waiting for the end of the world, *glass* people in a *city* of glass.

Sound like anybody you know?

He takes off his pants, folds them neatly.

And I watch them go, taking their *riveting* lives with them, waiting and hoping in vain for something in their faces—the first light of awareness—which never comes. How do they miss *me? Me!* Kenny Appleton, their old pal from the past, standing there sharing their grief. It's taken me almost ten years to grow the balls I needed to come back home. But that's just *entre nous* for now.

Blank faces—ivory bright, floating in the night above legs as white and fragile as meatless bones—they cross to the safety and comfort to be had for the price of a crosstown bus. How con*veni*ent to be dropped within walking distance of one's own little life. Each one of them *need*ing, *want*ing *some*thing, but not a *wish* in their heads for what it might be. You'd think dreaming would be easy when you're unconscious to begin with, *I* say. But then, why go to all that nasty trouble to conjure up something creative—when there's beer in the fridge?

People say: if I were *you*, I'd try to be more understanding. I say *back*: if I were *you*, I'd change my hair and wear different clothes.

(singing)
Tell me what's the colour of my eyes?
Look away and tell me if you can,
Now look back again,
'Cause lover I've got more
than one surprise ...

Turning his back to the audience, he slowly pulls his underwear down to his ankles and with one foot kicks them off, catching them with one hand.

It's a seat-wetting thrill performing for this bunch.

He turns around, keeping himself covered, wagging a finger at the audience, then laughs. He puts on a black, diaphanous robe.

On the one hand—*me.* A creative act, from tilted head to red-painted toe. I love me, who do you love? And on the other hand—*you*: well, really, what can anyone say? A sad commentary on free will and then anything nice your mother might have to add. Do mothers *say* anything nice?

He notices someone in the audience.

That's a lovely blouse you have on. It's so you. Youyouuou. All in favour of keeping it simple, say Sears!

No, no, I'm not saying there's anything *wrong* with it. I mean there's flattering and then there's—this. And sometimes that's the best way to go—save a few bucks. I mean if you're not going to care about your hair, why spend money on a top? Seriously, though, did you buy that *new*? Now myself, I can't go *in* to Value Village. The polyester makes my eyes water.

He returns to his dressing table, puts on a pair of pantyhose and continues putting on his make-up.

I have to bring the room down, now ... Mmmmmm ... What are you *ready* to hear? What do I *want* you to hear even if you're *not* ready? And if it disturbs you, my little story, will you sit and listen anyway, knowing, trusting, that ultimately, the art of my life, the shape, colour and light of it, might have *more* meaning for you than your *own*? Can you con*ceive* of such an idea, and if you could, would you *buy*? Can you afford not to? But I'm warning you now: when it's *your* turn to speak, to share with us all, the narrative—somewhat less than art I'm sure—of your *own* little life, I'll probably have to go pee ... and I won't miss a thing.

I must speak of *him* now, ready or not. Donnie Gallagher was what we used to call "one of the older boys." He was really only a few years ahead of me in school, but the hair on his face and the thickness of his nakedness, glimpsed during Saturday morning swims at Little Lake, seemed like unbridgeable distances to me: age eleven and skinny.

And many years ago—ten, twenty, a hundred—they had been best friends, Donnie Gallagher and Jimmy McHugh, but so diferent—I *assure* you.

Donnie paid attention to people, but that made people nervous—I lived for his attention. He looked at you as though he could *see* you—he could. Sinners don't welcome that kind of light. Nobody in Jimmy's gang of boys much liked the witness such eyes as Donnie's were likely to bear either.

I think now that Donnie must have been a problem for everybody: his family, teachers, the other boys. Who was there to fight for Donnie? Certainly not that brother of his and certainly not the adults who clucked their tongues and shook their heads at such a boy as Donnie, so beautiful, so dazzlingly beautiful ... so publicly uncaring of it—so inevitably problematic for a city with such a long list of dos and don'ts and don'ts. Our little town, so lights out and missionary!

Whether in crowds or on empty streets, Jimmy and Donnie played the game of East City cool, especially in the summer—*that* summer, the one I *most* remember and measure us all by—but don't we all have a summer like that. Except yours probably involved cut-offs and tits.

Jimmy and Donnie, just two boys hangin' with a gang of seven or eight others, a veritable *crowd* of masculinity—but *never* a couple, please. And always, at the end of a day spent swimming at Little Lake, or climbing Armour Hill or riding our bikes to Lakefield for ice cream, I would see Jimmy and Donnie, *alone*, talking in the low tones that older boys use when they're no longer lost in the larger posse, where the posturing of men in groups is no longer required.

And for reasons I never understood, yours truly was the only outsider Jimmy and Donnie welcomed into those precious moments in the day when there was just the two of them, just the two. Maybe they let me in because I was young, too young to matter, a baby. A moment's silence please for my lost youth—that's enough.

Maybe because I was quiet, as invisible as the help—that I seemed not to notice. Oh, I noticed—*e-e-ev*erything. To my eyes, they seemed mysteriously bound, soldiers in arms, physically attached close like twins—the kind of twins, darling, that every mother fears giving birth to. Theirs was the kind of closeness between boys that causes discomfort if it lasts much past grade eight—but is so *no*ble in fiction, military history and wartime legend at a *later* age and when *lives* are threatened.

But lives are always being threatened, *I* say.

I stared at them both, up close, with purpose, hoping that whatever it was they shared would make itself visible to me, believing it would, if I just looked long enough and was nearby when the great secret made itself known. I was so patient ...When I get like this, I just want to be penetrated.

Donnie's family lived in one of six row houses, next to ours, a line of two-storey shacks, all just alike, except that Donnie Gallagher lived in one of them. Donnie's bedroom faced onto the pitiful hardscrabble patch we all thought of as our common backyard. Oh, but you should have seen the *front* lawns—immaculate. Tend to the garden that shows, my mother used to say.

The landlord—also common—had long since given up repairing the rotting fence which marked our property from the empty lot next to it. But to me, it was that fence I remember most. When I was four, I relied on my father's strong arms to lift me high above the crowds to see the clowns in the Christmas parade that each year marched past our house. And in a similar way, I always think of that fence as the boost I needed to get a better look at life as it passed by, as it unfolded that summer from Donnie's second floor window.

I was afraid that I was nothing more to Donnie than the little kid who walked him home each day, after he said good-bye to Jimmy McHugh on the corner—nothing else, nothing more, just the silent, invisible kid who was always there when it was just Donnie and Jimmy. What did he think of *me*? The short half-block to our connected homes was, I'm sure, an unimportant distance to Donnie Gallagher, but to me it was nothing less than a journey of miracles.

At the end of every hot, sweaty day, we followed the same route home, went through the same routine once we got there. He would look at me and smile and I would smile back. Donnie stood at his front door, I stood at mine, he a little tired and I—erect. Tastefully.

The ladies in the house will appreciate the aplomb of the well-behaved boner. The gentlemen will understand the impossibility of it.

Donnie would look at me and say, *"See you later,"* and together we would open our doors and go inside, to the sameness to be confronted there, until the marvel of tomorrow would bring the two of us together again. "See you later." Such an optimistic way to say good-bye. People say I'm hopeless. Not true. I have always been full of hope.

His make-up completed, he finds some jewellery, a pair of shoes.

Just when I thought the summer couldn't get any hotter, on one of those late afternoons when Donnie and I took our leave of each other, he spoke to me in a voice that seemed—different: *"See you later."* The words were the same, but the *tone* had changed, altering their meaning. Believing that Donnie and I shared the same desires, I judged the distance between this day's parting and all the others that had come before it—and I understood. I knew. "See you ... *later.*"

In the summer, night takes a long time to settle in, but again: I was *so* patient. I stood at Donnie's fence, *knowing* this was the place he meant for me to be. I saw the light come on in the second floor window, watched Donnie moving to music which, coming from so high up, I stood on tip-toe to hear. His hands moved, fingers first, through his long hair, and high above his head, his naked chest framed on either side by the curve of his arms like two long-necked swans guarding the treasure which floated between them ... that *face.* A willful spectacle meant only for me.

After several evenings of such life-altering theatre, there came a night when I saw two hands reach out to claim the white-feathered heavenly bird that was Donnie. He was no longer alone in the room, maybe never had been. But that night of the hands, he danced as he had danced every night.

And so it was, night after night: Donnie dancing, arms above his head, and hands reaching out for him—the hands of another boy—on many nights—starry, starless, moon-lit and moonless nights. The only constants in the drama were the dancing boy in the window, the hands that reached for him and the boy on the fence—the boy on shore.

Barefoot and fearful of wading in, I watched, my face burning and my eyes wet, watching the flight of the erotic, which did not wait for me: half-faces and shadows, male shoulders and masculine backs and arms raised like sails in the kind of lovemaking that looks like battle at sea, and always ended with Donnie, his belly up against the wall, as hot and hard—I imagined—as the lovemaking itself. And then, they stopped, two boys shipwrecked in each other's arms. And I waited for the tension in my own stiffness to subside and, head back, I relaxed: two last tears sealing defeat under sad, cypress lashes for me—the wretched earthbound.

And every night I took it, watched it happen, thinking nothing could be more painful—or beautiful. Until one night there was no light in the second-storey room I had come to regard as an extension of my own space. I waited for it, but it never came—no light, no dance, no dice. There was nothing to do but go inside, fall asleep and dream.

I heard my mother talking in the kitchen the next morning—too early in the morning to be anything but the local excitement over *bad* news. I crouched at the top of the stairs, listening to her cluck her tongue about Donnie Gallagher's accident in Little Lake—she was particularly bitter that year, her prized roses winning only second place at the Exhibition. Listening to her speak of Donnie, lying in a hospital bed fighting for his life, I could hear her taste the news, knowing what this must be doing to his mother—whose roses had won first.

And two mornings later, sitting across from her at the kitchen table eating breakfast, I watched her swallow—deliciously—the saddest news of all. *"The Gallagher boy died last night,"* she said, licking her lips. "*Every year somebody drowns in that lake,"* she said. *"Why not a Gallagher?"*

My mother was her*self*, only a few years later, the tasty subject of an early morning neighbourhood bulletin—served over breakfast. Poor mother, such a *horrid* death. That car burned forever.

But on that morning, to hear her speak of Donnie so, to learn of history changing course in such tones ... I won't speak of my sorrow. I won't say I felt anything at all—what would it mean to you? I won't—except to say that I began to think about Donnie's funeral and the thought of who else might attend—Donnie's prince.

My need to go, once ignited, was fanned by the burning passion to see the face of the boy who had reached out to Donnie on so many nights and to whom Donnie ... had reached back.

And so I went—to find him. I imagined him walking in, sitting in the same room with me, joined in devotion for fallen Donnie—and I would know him. We would know each other. I felt on the verge of a vast discovery about the relations between men and men, stood poised for some measureless understanding ... of love. And this time, I would be part of it. They say each life comes down to a few moments. This was one.

But he did not come, he didn't, and by his absence, some large part of the world—maybe all of it—seemed drawn into question and tossed aside by disappointed gods who held the power to dismiss any world where men refused to love other men. Our planet was being punished, torn away from the sky–how else to explain the blackness above us that day?

No. I alone mourned for Donnie.

After the funeral, I stayed by Donnie's fence in the dark afternoon looking up at the empty window. I knew two prayers and said them both. I knew one hymn and sang it over and over. And I cried, knowing, that there were no supermen, no gods, to inflict the kind of hurt I felt on this boy, on the whole world, for ignoring Donnie's death—and worse, his life. No footmen paying tribute, no fraternity to repair the skyline, there was only me, grounded like a bird shorn of its wings, plucked and shivering, its feathers clutched in the greedy fingers of a mean child ... probably a boy.

He sings, very big and all showbiz. He moves to the coat rack, drops the robe from his back, and puts on a black, glittery dress.

(singing)
Je t'adore trop.
Je suis folle, c'est vrai.
Parçe que je sais bien
qu'il faut que tu me quittes, je le sais.

As he finishes, he turns to face the audience.

Have you ever seen my act? I lip-sync in both official languages.

He exposes a tattoo on his arm, lovingly caresses it.

A badly-drawn dragon means just one thing—prison.

Oh, let me recapture it for you. The living quarters are a little cramped, but it's the bathroom that really sells the place: a large, well-lit room, tiles on the floor—so necessary for Spanish dancing or showers meant for forty. One minute I'm rinsing my heair and the next, my face is being shoved into the wall—with a most attention-getting blade at my throat.

Who is *this?*, I wondered? Well, wouldn't *you*?

I wasn't sure if that was water or blood running down my back, but when I felt those fingers do the walking up the old dirt road, I was pretty sure what was required here. And I thought, well, apart from the knife and the pushing my face into the *wall* part, I've been here before. I mean, they don't call me party-ass for nothing. And, frankly, what's two minutes out of a day? It's obvious that I had it in me to please him. It's obvious I had it in me to please him.

For a moment, looking up at my gentleman caller, naked and wet, the light behind him, I thought he looked like an angel. He moved, grabbing me from behind, twisting my arm: "*Sit back,*" he said. Hmmm. And I thought: such an interesting voice, cold, sharp with ice—and yet, oddly ... familiar. I studied his face. Ah, yes, that *face.*

The illusion ended—this was no angel—and I remembered. I was only twenty-one, a mere ten years since I'd last seen Jimmy McHugh, but at that time of life ... ten years, well, we change so much don't we? And not at all. "*What are you lookin' at?*" Jimmy McHugh asked me.

Well, I know my *cue* when I hear it. *"I remember you, Jimmy McHugh."* And then I said aloud the truth I had never before even said to myself: *"I saw you in Donnie's room, loving him, night after night."*

Looking in his eyes, I felt the same fear that Jimmy McHugh must have tasted each time he kissed Donnie's beautiful face—and now it was in my mouth, too. And I understood then what it was, this power that brought men together and tore love away from them: fear, terror. Nothing less. How remarkable to be thinking all that, to know it all in an instant. How extraordinary to be in such a position, so close to Jimmy, and so close to Donnie because of it.

I never felt as close to Donnie as I did in that moment.

And with that thought to distract me, Jimmy McHugh's cold, easy knife punctured my left lung, taking my air, leaving me unable to speak, silent. Me. What a way to go.

At his mercy, I was compelled to listen—how Jimmy McHugh liked to compel—listen, with my dying ears, to a story he thought would never be told again. About what really happened to Donnie Gallagher, my Donnie.

Jimmy McHugh pushed Donnie into the water of course. Pushed him off the pier at Little Lake when Donnie threatened to tell the world that the shoulders, the arms, the hands, the half-face that embraced Donnie's own on those starry, starless, moon-lit and moonless nights belonged to Jimmy McHugh himself.

Worse than telling the world, Donnie threatened to tell our tiny, bored little city—with its lengthy list of dos and don'ts and don'ts. I loved Donnie. But Jimmy loved Paula Miller and no doubts about that please. And Donnie was about to cast some very serious doubts.

I laugh at myself—which gives me the right to laugh at you. Lovemaking! Love-making that looked like *battle*! Night after night, all summer long, I watched Donnie Gallagher being raped by Jimmy McHugh and I didn't even know it.

There's a word for people like me, people that stupid: romantic. God help the kind of boy I was.

A tear runs down his cheek. He wipes it away like the enemy it is, regards his wet fingertips.

A tear escapes, the bastard.

He reaches for a wig, puts it on. His transformation complete, he considers himself in the mirror.

"Linger a moment, so fair thou art ..."

Funerals are like drag, pure theatre, like clues to the puzzle of a life—of life itself, really. Mourners fascinate me—like audiences. But sometimes they can let you down—like audiences.

A light comes up on the doorway. He walks toward it and as he does so, his dressing area is swallowed in darkness.

Jimmy McHugh might have left me for dead on the shower floor, but his knife had further work to do, destructive work—and he carved up the parts of me that threatened him most. But as you can see ... *I lived!* ... and the story—gets—told.

You think drag is sexual—it's creative. A decision, where you've made none. The "girls" I perform with have chosen to find life at night, away from the judgments and violence of daylight hours. Some are even contemplating an operation—the operation—to make their girlhood official twenty-four hours a day. The ultimate creative choice!

I had that kind of creativity thrust upon me by Jimmy McHugh. He sliced me up, threw me away and out of his world, a world that doesn't have a place for men who lack what I now lack—except at night, late night, dark night, starry, starless, moon-lit and moonless night—that part of the day most of you sleep through because what else would you do with it?

He scratches at the air with his fingernails.

Far sharper than the blade he cut me with ... *"Rest in peace,"* he whispered in my ear, laughed in my ear.

He looks over his shoulder.

Back at you, Jimmy McHugh!

My life: noticed and reviled for being noticed. But I'm not here for myself. I'm not doing this for me, for kicks or for bucks. This performance is for *Donnie!* And tonight I want to *scream and shout and sing who I am and what I have done for Donnie Gallagher!* ... dead so many years. Ten, twenty, a hundred?

Once there was a boy named Donnie—and then there was not.

He goes to the window and looks out.

I hear the wail of a siren in the distance—high up it seems, like Donnie's music always came to me from high up—a reminder that accidents occur, tragedies happen, lives are lost and love taken.

I'm sorry for what people have to go through, live with or live without.

Another bad boyfriend song blares through the streets. The odd woman looks up and fewer still grunt their way back out into the world's end. An old man passes gas as he steps down into an already asphyxiated street. These are rich rewards, I think, for me, the great pretender in their midst. Not even death can stir in these people an imagination, a notion of who I am or what I have done. They accept what they are told, reach for nothing on their own and are grateful for even less.

So, no applause tonight, no standing o! *File out, then!* Or maybe the trouble is with me. Maybe I'm getting too old for—expectations. I'm not the young boy I used to be ... I had such balls then.

He picks up a black, sheer scarf, wraps its long edges around his neck, over his shoulders and down his back. He considers himself in the mirror on his dressing table.

The only admiring eye in the mirror belongs to me: shine on, bright and dangerous object. Ah, to have passion and affect change! I genuflect to its fatal light. Once more, I begin to feel my awareness ... my superiority ... the power of my big girl's blouse.

He moves to the door, carrying a handbag, puts on a pair of sunglasses.

And that is why—each night as they turn dull-lidded eyes for one last look at the corpse laid out in the front room—it will never occur to them that I am the one who killed the sonofabitch.

He walks through the door and closes it.

Darkness ends the play.

Contributors

Leah Bailly, the recent recipient of the Vancouver International Short Fiction Award, lives in Victoria, where she has finally touched down after a few years bouncing around the tropics. She has work forthcoming in *sub-TERRAIN.*

Adam Chiles is the 2003-2004 Reginald S. Tickner Fellow at Gilman School in Baltimore. He recently completed his MFA at the University of Arizona. His work previously appeared in PRISM 39:1.

Seth Feldman teaches in the Department of Film & Video at York University (Toronto), where he has served as Dean of Fine Arts and Robarts Chair of Canadian Studies. In addition to academic publications in Film Studies and Communications, he has written twenty-three radio documentaries for the CBC program, IDEAS. His work previously appeared in PRISM 10:2.

Avital Gad-Ckyman lives in an island in southern Brazil and enjoys autumns and springs on the beach. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in numerous journals including *Glimmer train, Raven Chronicles, Salon.com, In-Posse Review, Salt Hill Review* and *Absinthe Literary Review.* She hopes to soon publish her short story collection and novel.

Steven Heighton is a former grand prize winner of PRISM's annual short fiction contest (PRISM 29:3). His most recent book, *The Shadow Boxer,* was published by Knopf in Canada, was a *Publishers' Weekly* Book of the Year in the USA, and has also appeared in Britain and Italy. His last poetry book, *The Ecstasy of Skeptics,* was a Governor General's Award finalist; last year he received the Petra Kenney Prize for new work which will appear in a collection of poems and translations to be published by Anansi next spring.

Eve Joseph lives in Brentwood Bay, BC, where she works as a counsellor at the Victoria hospice. Her work has appeared in *Descant, Event, Grain, The Malahat Review, Margie: The American Journal of Poetry* and *Vintage 2000.*

Carl Lukasewich lives in Calgary, where he works as a designer. He is a recent graduate of the Alberta College of Art and Design. His illustrations have appeared in *Applied Arts* and *American Illustration.*

Tanis MacDonald writes and studies in Victoria, where she is working towards a doctoral dissertation on the Canadian elegy. Her book of poetry, *Holding Ground* (Seraphim Editions) was short-listed for the Gerald Lampert Award. She is the winner of the 2003 Bliss Carman Award for Poetry. A second book, *Fortune*, is forthcoming from Turnstone Press.

Gordon Mason was brought up in the West of Scotland. His poems have been published widely and won international prizes. His forth collection, *On Stony Ground*, is due out shortly from Peterloo Poets. Work-in-progress is the collection *Sailing on Glass.* He has taught high school in England and America and advised teachers in India and Nepal.

Camilia Matuk holds a B.Sc. Hons in Biological Sciences. She is currently working on a M.Sc. in Biomedical Communications (A.K.A. Medical Illustration). Her poetry appeared in *Comfusion* as part of their 'Nth Annual Literary Award.

Donn Short is a Vancouver-based playwright. His first play, *The Winter Garden*, was the winner of the duMaurier Arts National One-Act Play Competition. His next plays, *Blonde Tulips* and *Accidental Clarity*, were originally produced in Los Angeles.

Daniel Tobin is the Chair of the Writing, Literature, and Publishing Department at Emerson College in Boston. His poetry has appeared in many journals including *Stand*, *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, *The Paris Review* and *The Southern Review.* His work has also been anthologized in *The Norton Introduction to Poetry.* A new book of poems, *Double Life*, is forthcoming with Louisiana State University Press. His work last appeared in PRISM 37:3.

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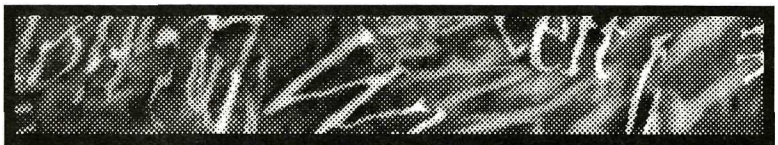

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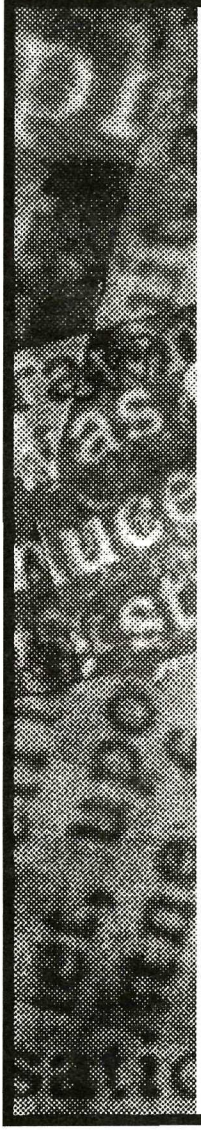

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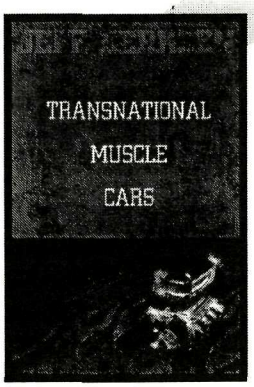

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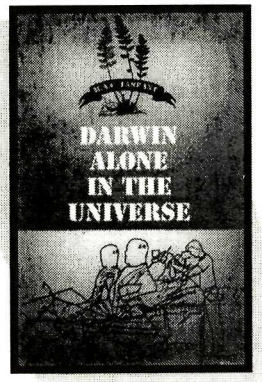

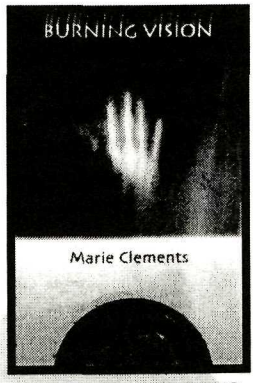

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Fiction/Poetry/Drama/Translation/Creative Nonfiction

41:3

In that quiet, Mitch hears himself ask the pilot, "What do you think, Charlie, can a 747 really land on a carrier?"

—Seth Feldman, Page 9

Leah Bailly
Adam Chiles
Seth Feldman
Avital Gad-Cykman
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