

PRISM

international

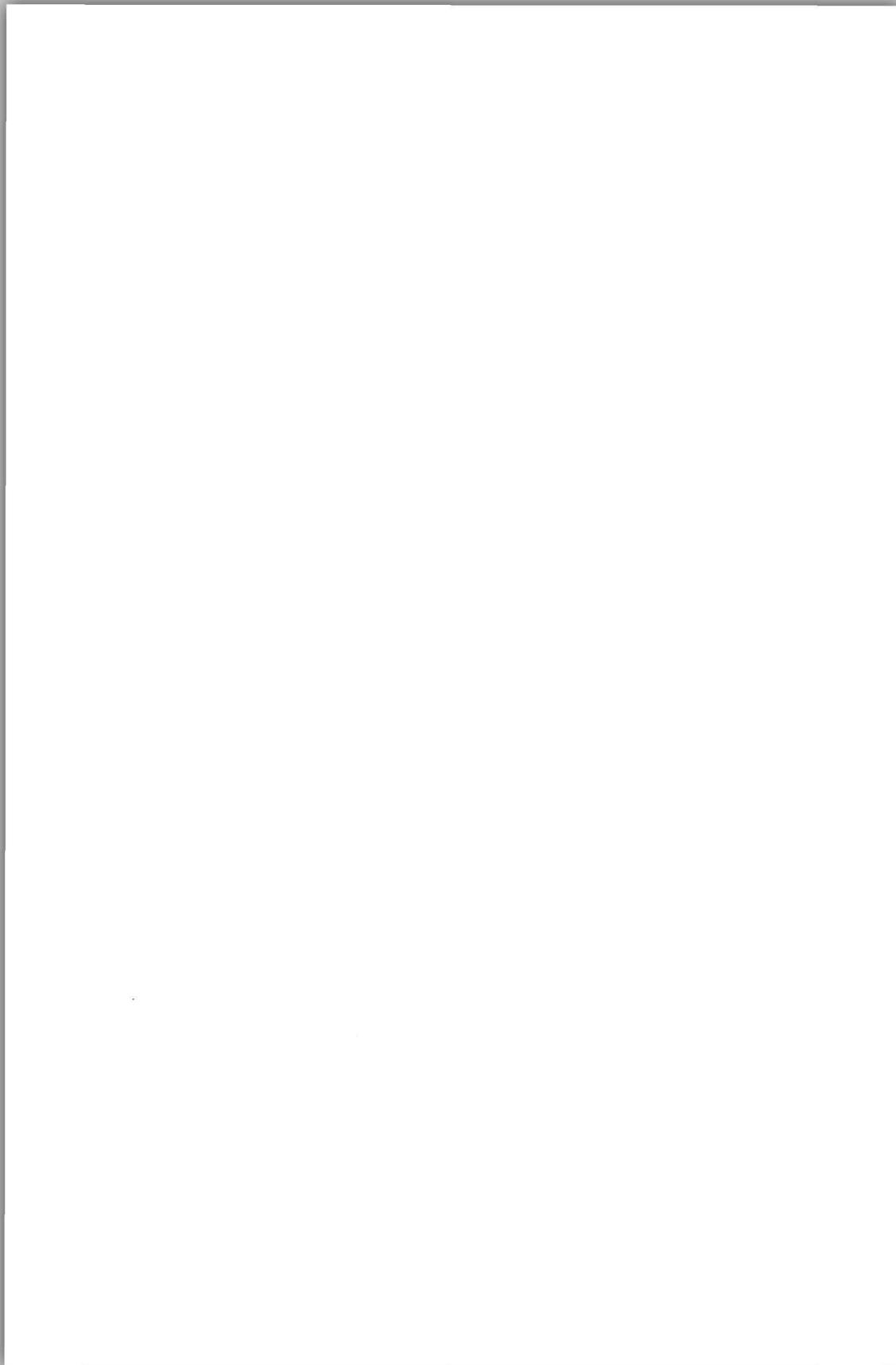
Summer
\$4.50



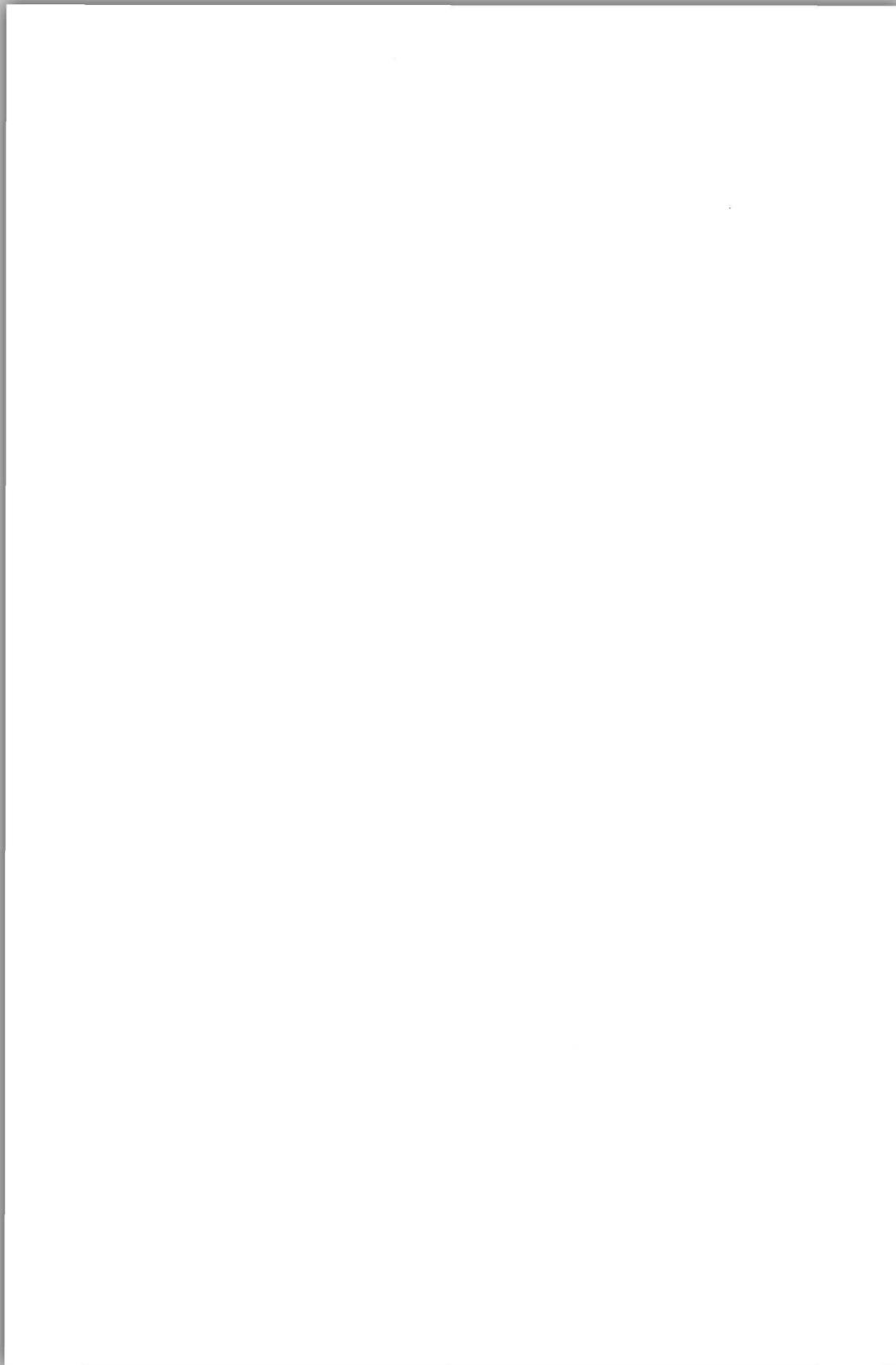
35:3

Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world

FICTION CONTEST ISSUE



PRISM
international



PRISM international

Editor

Sara O'Leary

Executive Editor

Tim Mitchell

Fiction Editor

Rick Maddocks

Poetry Editor

Regina Weaver

Advisory Editors

Keith Maillard

George McWhirter

Associate Editors

Sioux Browning

Melanie Little

Business Manager

S. L. McFerran

Production Manager

Jennifer Herbison

Editorial Board

Ian Cockfield

Darcia Dahl

Jessica Johnson

Bibiana Tomasic Kaulfuss

Miranda Pearson

Madeleine Thien

Nancy Turnberg

PRISM *international*, a magazine of contemporary writing, is published four times per year by the Creative Writing Program at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z1. Microfilm editions are available from University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan, and reprints from the Kraus Reprint Corporation, New York, N.Y. The magazine is listed by the Canadian Literary Periodicals Index.

E-mail address: prism@unixg.ubc.ca

WWW URL: <http://www.arts.ubc.ca/crwr/prism/prism.html>

Contents Copyright © 1997 PRISM *international* for the authors.

Cover art by Angela Grossman.

One-year individual subscriptions \$16.00; two-year subscriptions \$24.00; library and institution subscriptions \$22.00; two-year subscriptions \$36.00; sample copy \$5.00. Canadians add 7% G.S.T.

All manuscripts should be sent to the Editors at the above address. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with Canadian stamps or International Reply Coupons. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for six months and then discarded. Translations should be accompanied by copies of the work(s) in the original language. E-mail submissions must be sent as part of the mail body, or as MIME compliant attachments. The Advisory Editors are not responsible for individual selections, but for the magazine's overall mandate including continuity, quality, and budgetary obligations.

PRISM *international* purchases First North American Serial Rights for \$40.00 per page for poetry, and \$20.00 per page for other genres. Contributors receive a one-year subscription. PRISM *international* also purchases limited digital rights for selected work, for which it pays an additional \$10.00 per page.

Our gratitude to Dean Shirley S. Neuman and the Dean of Arts' Office at the University of British Columbia.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council and the Government of British Columbia through the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture.

Publications Mail Registry No. 5496. April 1997.



The Canada Council
Conseil des Arts du Canada

Contents

Vol. 35, No. 3 Spring 1997

Judge's Essay

Kenneth J. Harvey

Voice 7

Fiction

Jean McNeil
Elyse Gasco
Michael Kenyon
Andrew Hewitt
Nigel Maister
Cinda Gault
Alissa York
Bryant Ibbetson
Mark Wisniewski

Bethlehem 9
These Are Ghost Stories 26
The Beautiful Children 42
Heat 49
Where Am I? 55
Babcza 67
Those Who Trespass 75
Soccer Season Opener 81
Good 88

Contributors 94

1996 Prism International Fiction Contest Winners

Tied for First Prize - \$1000 each:

“Bethlehem”
Jean McNeil, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

“These Are Ghost Stories”
Elyse Gasco, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Second Prize - \$400:

“The Beautiful Children”
Michael Kenyon, Pender Isle, British Columbia, Canada

Runners-Up - \$200 each:

“Babcza”
Cinda Gault, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

“Heat”
Andrew Hewitt, Cambridge, England

“Those Who Trespass”
Alissa York, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada

“Where Am I?”
Nigel Maister, Rochester, New York, USA

Honourable Mentions:

Mark Wisniewski, Astoria, New York, USA “Good”
Bryant Ibbetson, Gainesville, Florida, USA “Soccer Season Opener”

There were 663 entries in this year’s competition. Submissions came from across North America, as well as from China, Israel, France, Ghana, Poland, New Zealand, Australia, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Bermuda. Thanks to everyone who entered the contest and good luck with your writing in the year to come.

Voice

Kenneth J. Harvey

How to justify the choice of one story over another? Each of the nine stories that made it past the final cut possessed a resonant style that set them above the other entrants. The criteria I used to judge the stories:

1. The writer must display the ability to write in an exceptional manner. There must be a hyper-awareness of the form's natural rhythms. The reader should be dazzled by the writer's use of language.

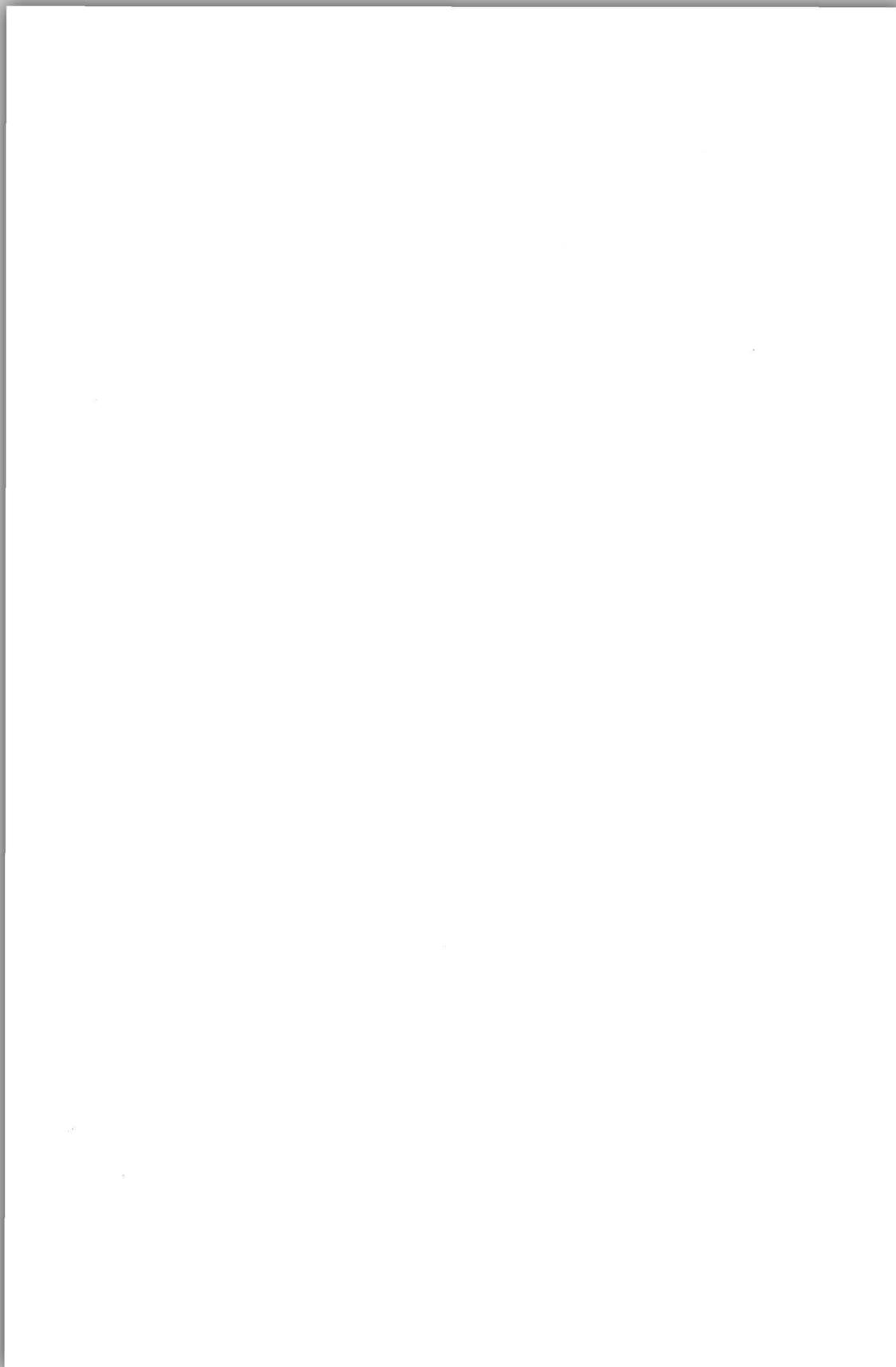
2. Something unique must be conveyed. Events must unfold, characters must become fully developed. Something authentic should be passed on, delivered, revealed. A story, after all, is a story because it is supposed to tell a 'story'.

3. The writer must present an original voice. This is the crowning touch. The mind picks up on the mental flavour of a story. It recognizes that flavour if the writing is distinct. In my mind, this is the most valuable asset. Even a delicate cerebral plot can be sustained by genuine style. You can teach a writer the mechanics of writing but you cannot teach that writer how to fabricate style.

In my mind, "These Are Ghost Stories" towered over most of the entries because of its luscious writing and its astonishing voice. The same can be said of "Bethlehem," although that story was more character-focused and utilized a traditional forward-driven plot. The second-place winner, "The Beautiful Children," was, in my mind, very near the first-place winners. Its literary layering made it sturdier than the runners-up and the honourable mentions. The remaining stories lacked the abstract weight, the steady ability to strike awe in me that the top three winners succeeded in accomplishing, and yet were also superbly inventive.

These are my selections, my view of how literature is supposed to work. To the writers who did not place in this contest, I can only say that the exclusion of your stories is by no means a dismissal of your talent. It only means that the work submitted did not suit my taste at this particular point in time.

To the winners, congratulations. These stories represent some of the most remarkable writing I have ever read.



Bethlehem

Jean McNeil

She is running back and forth to the bathroom, getting towels to put underneath him. The boy is sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not gay, *Senhora*."

"That's reassuring," she says, in English.

The boy scowls. "*Qué?*"

She switches to Portuguese. "He's my husband."

"Sure." The boy shrugs. He can see she wears no ring.

Behind the boy his hands are tied to the bedstead in a loose noose. They rotate gently within the confines of the rope, which has been covered in strips of pillow-case.

She disappears into the tiny bathroom. When she emerges she is carrying a towel. She wrings her hands in it first, noticing a dark brown ring underneath her nails, next to the skin-dried blood. Suddenly her hands look alien, like mandibles, or claws: the appendages of another species.

She flicks the wall switch, turns on the fan. "I have to dress his wound first."

"What's wrong with him?"

The boy's copper skin has turned to onyx in the soupy light. It is the rainy season and dark has fallen at four o'clock. Peru-shaped clouds bloom: the rain clouds that float across the Amazon basin every afternoon. She doesn't answer the boy. She concentrates on dressing the wound, slapping on the yellow lotion and winding the gauze around his midriff. He whispers something in her ear, but she misses the sense of it. She kisses his forehead. She does all this with the same detachment she would feel if she were watching herself on film. Everything she does seems to happen too slowly. Even the walls of the room look very far away.

"I've been shot too, *Senhora*." He pulls up his shirt to show her a tiny puckered scar just to the right of his abdomen.

"Good for you. Here, catch." He claps his hands over the small packet. The boy opens his hands and grins. She leans against the wall. "Put it on."

As the boy unbuttons his jeans she goes to sit in the chair by the window. The sheer curtain floats in the breeze and brushes her hair like

an insect. She watches them closely, noting all the manoeuvres and sequences, as if she were cataloguing them. The only thing that still surprises her is how men can become aroused without really feeling any particular desire. Otherwise she is not shocked. It is really heterosexual sex she finds most disturbing: the appendages fitting each other with the puerile facility of Lego.

After a while the boy begins to moan.

"*Basta*," she says. Enough.

She pulls him off the bed. She hates it when they moan: it sounds like the death cries of animals. She stuffs some *cruzeiros* into his hand. He scowls. He had been expecting dollars. He trips into his trousers, his graceless movements revealing his youth. He is all gangling adolescent limbs.

When he is in the hall she shuts the door behind him and turns to the man on the bed. He is sweating. She goes into the bathroom to get more towels to wipe him down. When she pulls on the light cord she cannot help seeing her face in the mirror. She grabs another of the too-thin towels and quickly pulls off the light.

* * *

I love to watch the rains come. It doesn't get dark so much as the sky seems to become coated with metal. Then it comes, bulleting and horizontal. Potholes open in the streets, as if they've always been there, like wounds underneath the skin of the asphalt, waiting to open.

About once a week, after the rains, I go to buy earrings in the market by the cathedral. I make a lot of friends in the market because only tourists usually shop there, and they speak little or no Portuguese. I have picked up the deep-throated, meowing accent of Pará. I even use the *tu* and conjugate it correctly. This is an interesting regionalism; nobody but people from Pará do this in the whole of Brazil.

The *Basilica de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré* is my favourite church in this city of heat-stunned churches. It is modelled upon St. Paul's in Rome. Not far from our apartment building is the quarter where the rubber barons used to live. The best of these Portuguese mansions have been built, natives of Belém tell me, by Antônio Lemos and Lauro Sodré. Brazilians say their names with the gravity usually reserved for military heroes. It's one of the things I like most about this country: they hold their architects in reverence. The buildings are the colour of faded lime, oyster-hued, and peeling, as if they have been attacked by some kind of eczema. In the middle of a rainstorm the whole city looks like a torched Versailles, or the earthquake-smashed apartments of ancient Pompeii.

I go out so often that a lot of people know me on sight by now. There is not a large foreign community, so people are not exhausted and surly in the face of my inevitable foreign-ness. I could love this city if I were here

under different circumstances. I even take an interest in the riot scenes in the supermarkets, when shoppers discover rice has been made more expensive yet again. Inflation is running at forty-six percent per month. To a degree I am protected by my cache of American dollars.

I don't know why he is indifferent to the city. He behaves like someone who has come here to die. He has become very interior, fixated upon himself and his reactions. As far as he is concerned, he could be in Calcutta, or Toronto. Maybe this is just his way of saying he wants to go home.

I love to watch the rains come but sometimes I wonder why I stay here. We're young: he's twenty-four, I'm twenty-one. We're almost out of money. We should go home; I should leave him. But I'm still edgy, still hungry for experience.

* * *

The nearest slum neighbourhood, *favela*, is where she goes to make her contacts for him. Without Lourdes, she could not have dreamed of entering the *favela*. Lourdes has lissome legs, trim and pretty. She can see the girl takes great care with her appearance; her hair is always neatly clipped in pink plastic butterfly-shaped hair pins, her shirts always spotlessly white. Most days she wears the same pair of blue shorts, but every day they are pressed and clean. She manages to keep up this level of hygiene and meticulousness in a one-room tin shack where she, her father, and half-brother live.

As she enters with Lourdes through the darkened house, shapes shift in the corners—people rising from the floor, or falling down; she can't tell which. They pass through the house and emerge through the back door into narrow alleyways of corrugated tin-roof dark squares. As they descend the stairs to the alleyway, Lourdes walks in front of her, putting each foot delicately on the mulch-soft wooden steps.

Then she sees him, or at least she thinks it's a he, judging from his bulk. He lies on his side, his head propped up by an arm. Folds of fat droop where his bicep should be. Lying on his platform, which has the slab-like aspect of a masseur's table or a surgeon's bed, he looks like a whale or a beached seal. His mouth is lipsticked; his hair drawn back into a bun. He wears a purple piece of material—the exact colour of *açaí* berries that come from the jungle—draped over his floundrous body in the style of a toga. His dark skin glistens as if it has been greased. His eyes, she notices, are extremely cunning.

"Is he a man or a woman?" she asks Lourdes when they are past him.

"Who? Gorda?" the girl grins, hiding her mouth behind her hand. "Who knows? A man. We think."

"Then why is he called Gorda, in the feminine, as you would call a woman?"

"I don't know."

"Is he homosexual?"

Lourdes considers this for a few seconds.

"What do you mean?"

She gave her mock-severe look. "You know very well what that means. Don't tell me you can live twelve years in a place like this and not know. It means a man who likes men, or a woman who likes women."

Lourdes screws up her face. "Will you buy me an ice cream?"

"Sure," she says, taking her by the hand. "Let's go."

"It's not really a zoo," Lourdes corrects her, pointing to the sign, *Bosque Rodrigo Alves*. She has taken Lourdes there to buy her an ice cream. "It's a Bosque. How do you say that in English?"

"Wood."

Lourdes shifts her mouth in emulation of her consonants. "Voooodd."

"That's right. You've got it."

"There are more animals at the Goeldi. Do you want me to take you there?"

"Sure, let's go." She does not tell the girl she has been to the Emilio Goeldi museum at least five times already.

They enter the gardens, following a path of gravel the colour of wood chips. On either side of them are clumps of tropical vegetation. It is early morning and a weekday, so they almost have the place to themselves. She reminds herself that she must avoid the snakes, but they go up there anyway, she and Lourdes leaning over the railings, looking at the boa and the anaconda which are kept in cages placed next to each other. The boa drapes itself over a bare, constructed tree branch like an exhausted inner tube. The anaconda lolls in the water. They can only see its eyes and its massive head.

"Which do you think is bigger?" Lourdes' vanilla ice cream drips down her fingers. She extends her tongue, small and feline, to lap it up.

"I think the anaconda is the biggest snake in the world, so it must be bigger."

Lourdes licks her ice cream thoughtfully. "I like them."

"I hate them."

They move onto the alligators. "These are imported alligators," Lourdes informs her officially. "They were brought here from Florida."

"They should have only Amazonian animals here. It's not as though there aren't enough of them, or that they don't need protection."

Lourdes looks at her sharply. She has to remind herself that most Brazilians are unused to hearing opinions about the United States that are not entirely positive.

They move on to the aviary where the macaws are making a racket. Lourdes has finished her ice cream and is looking longingly at her soggy

napkin, which has mopped up most of the melted vanilla.

"There's one more thing you have to see before you go," Lourdes says, pulling at her arm. "The Amazon is famous for it. Do you know what it is?"

She smiles, and shakes her head.

"Oh, come on." Lourdes doubles her body up into a burlesque of impatience. "It's this big." She throws her arms out on either side of her body, her face turning pink with strain.

"*Não*," she shakes her head, trying not to laugh. "*Não posso imaginar.*"

"The Victoria Régia lily. Do you know, this flower is like Gorda. It is both male and female. It changes overnight. That's why it's so big."

Lourdes begins to frown in concentration. "It begins the day as a male, but then at dusk it traps this insect, a beetle. And it uses this beetle to pollinate"—Lourdes grins, proud of her use of the word—"to reproduce itself. And then, by morning, it has become a female. The plant, not the beetle."

"And does it let the beetle go in the morning?"

Lourdes frowns. "I don't know."

They go to the indoor exhibit, billed as The Natural History of the Amazon. "*Belém*," Lourdes points to the sign on one of the bird displays that recounts the importance of the trade in tropical birds to the city. "I can read that word. Do you know what it means? Bethlehem." The girl stumbles over the consonants, unable to aspirate the 'h' and concretize the 't', so that it comes out sounding like *Betchleheem*.

"Bethlehem."

Lourdes cracks up laughing. For the rest of the morning she coaches the girl to say it properly, in English. Lourdes insists. Still, she wonders if she had been cruel, teaching the girl to say a word she will never use again.

At noon, they part.

"You have to get back to your *namorado*," Lourdes states, a little flatly.

"Yes." *Namorado* means both 'boyfriend' and 'betrothed'.

"I know a good new boy for you, Ana," Lourdes says, using her name. She doesn't normally do this; she's doing it for the same reason a salesman would: to pretend or invite familiarity.

Suddenly, she feels sullied. She wants to let the girl know that their friendship can be pure.

"He's not for me."

Lourdes says nothing, just walks away from her, turning to look over her shoulder from time to time, but she keeps on walking without turning around, heading for home.

* * *

Lone taxis scoot up and down the wide streets that lead to the docks like

frightened rodents. Massive gutters are built alongside each *rua* and *avenida* to trap the daily deluge. They are so big that in any other city I'm sure they would be called canals.

Every day, all year, it rains twice a day. Once at one o'clock, once at five. The second installment of rain is less predictable. But the sky is almost always clear in time to see the sun disappear into the river.

Our apartment is on the eleventh floor. We live in the highest high-rise in Belém, on Praça Tiradentes: "Toothpuller's Plaza." It is American in style, furnished in chrome and mirrors, but Brazilian in intent. The kitchens all have a maid's elevator leading onto them, and a small maid's room right next to the laundry room. For a Brazilian, an apartment like this costs a fortune, but we have American dollars.

Every evening at five-thirty I go out onto our balcony and watch the sunset. To the right are the docks: the oblong forms of warehouses look like greased lozenges in the setting sun. Cranes tower above them, lopsided, delicate. In the distance is the Ilha do Marajó: a wedge of green dotted with what looks like lakes. This time of year the island is a virtual flood plain.

To the left is the river, heading toward its intersection with the Xingú. And to the north, nothing, at least for us city dwellers. Only an untransversible forest stretching from here to the Guyanas. For most of the foreigners and the wealthy Brazilians, the only thing north of Belém of any significance is Miami. Both Varig and VASP have daily flights there. I see them taking off from the airport, which is also visible from my balcony. Planes are so different when they fly in; they seem to come in at half-speed, hovering like exhausted metal angels. When they take off they are as clear and intentful as an arrow. In their burning thrust into the stratosphere they almost seem to write MIAMI OR BUST.

One or two nights a week we go out to eat. We always end up in one of the many very good seafood restaurants.

"We should stop eating so much shrimp." He makes a face, as soon as we have ordered shrimp again. "I never thought I'd be sick of shrimp."

I like *vatapá*, a shrimp dish in a rich sauce made from Amazonian fruit. But my favourite is *maniçoba*, shrimps cooked in leaves from the bitter casava, which are also toxic, at least under most circumstances. To be used in cooking, its leaves first have to be simmered for a full eight days to drain them of their natural poison.

* * *

She opens the door to their apartment. As soon as she opens it she feels a wave of tiredness wash over her. The plants look plastic, she notes for the hundredth time, even though they are real. Then, that's the tropics. He sits watching a *telenovela* to improve his Portuguese. Its name translates into *As The World Turns*.

“Hi,” he grins, and turns his eyes upon her.

She has seen them hundreds of times before, but she will never exhaust their magnificence. They are dark green, not large, but perfectly framed by thick ginger eyelashes. Chapped skin flakes off around his straight nose and thin, svelte eyebrows. His lips are full, criss-crossed like the stitching in a quilt. His hair is red-gold; a prominent, but not jutting, jaw line, and wide-sprung cheekbones show traces of Slavic ancestry. His face, as always, causes her to think of unlikely foreign phenomena: the loping walk of the Bushmen of the Kalahari, the disdainful turned-down mouths of the ancient Incas. Every time she looks at him she feels a kind of exquisite shifting taking place inside her, as if she were made up, not of veins and organs, but of sand bars.

He is not a large man, but his limbs are perfectly in proportion. He is still almost as muscled as he was when he went to the gym every day. She has never seen anyone, not even Lourdes, who has such beautiful limbs: his forearms, for instance, which are tendon-hard and transversed by a riverine network of veins. Sometimes she runs her forefinger along them, pointing to the places where they branch.

“That’s the Tapajós,” she says, where one thick vein departs from another. “That’s the Solimoes.”

His skin has the delicacy of parchment. She can swing next to him in a hammock and not say anything for hours. They don’t need to talk. But she doesn’t like the burnt-metal taste of this supposed languor or ease, this relatively cheap idyll.

She’s aware that this is not real life, even though she enjoys her friends and her life, her students. She loves the city. Even in the midst of her experience of living here, she already knows she will never forget it. But she also knows it is a place to be left behind in favour of more rigorous realities. He does not seem to realize this. Sometimes she thinks he has no aspirations in particular.

Later, they sit together in the darkness in front of the window, illuminated by the sodium light of the docks. Flecks of white dot the river: the headlamps of boats. On the ink-viscous river they seem to form a mirrored pattern of the stars.

“You are everything to me.”

Does she say this, or does she just think it?

From the moment she met him—when she had to lean against the wall for support, such was the impact of seeing someone for whom she’d been waiting—she had never expected not to know, at any point, where he was; whether he lived or died.

Sometimes she has this vision of him out in the world, without her. He is in Srinagar, maybe, the hue of his beautiful ochre skin the exact colour of deserts waiting for the rains to come. He has the grace that all people

whose fingers are longer than their palms have. In his every movement is the same fluidity as that of a lazy swimmer, heavy with supper, about to go under.

Between her fingers is his hair. It feels as soft as the tendrils of sea anemones. Noises from the docks, twenty blocks away, crackle into the apartment. Eleven stories up, she thinks, you hear everything.

Night falls. On the equator, she has the impression that the world does not turn.

When they left behind the northern winter and came to Brazil she thought she would hear sounds of dense forests at night. She wanted to be surrounded by a breathing, whispering conspiracy of trees. But it was the sounds of the city that came to her every night: Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Sao Paulo, Manaus, and finally Belém. She could only make money teaching English in the cities.

When they first came to the Amazon they flew in from Brasilia. In the plane, she saw Manaus rise up beneath them like a giant satellite dish. Fifty feet from the edge of the airport runway was the rainforest.

A few days later they flew to Belém. The plane took off just before dusk. From her window seat she watched the night come over the river. They flew into its mouth in increasing darkness; to her left, toward Venezuela, the sky was streaked purple. Then she lost the shape of the river beneath her in the night.

That night in their hotel in Belém, he took a wisp of her hair in his hand, twirled it between his fingers.

"It's not you I need."

"Who is it," she said. "*Who?*"

She thought she was shouting; her voice came out a whisper. In that way it was like a dream.

"What," he said. His lips were dry and they smacked as he said it, the sound of desert-bleached bones brushed by wind. "What I need."

That night she went out on her own into the still-baking thoroughfares, clogged with vehicles whose axles and undercarriages were caked with red dirt from driving the Trans-Amazonica highway. Curtains of rain brushed her cheek. Steam rose from her linen and cotton clothes—once crisp, now soaked as sex-soiled sheets.

* * *

From our balcony eleven floors above the city, I can see the ferry to Macapá wandering into the river. I've never been there, and from what I've heard I don't want to go. It is a heat-ragged city on the northern rim of the Amazon with a soccer field, a landing dock, and not much else. I've seen the ferry leaving the dock, barely moving as it slogs through the licorice viscosity of the river. It's an old rusting tub by any standard, so it

won't have any navigational equipment. By some sonar instinct like bats—it dodges the hulks of big cargo boats, the Amazon steamers. The boat leaves Belém at midnight and takes twenty-six hours to cross the Amazon. That means it arrives at two in the morning. The transport schedules in the Amazon are unreal: buses leave at three or four in the morning and arrive at the same time. No wonder no one gets any sleep.

Caracas is a four-hour flight away. The cities which are near, at least in relative terms—Cayenne, Manaus—are still jungle backwaters. Even Lima or Bogota is five hours' flying time away, including the inevitable stops in Leticia. Rio and Sao Paulo are about five hours by air, in the frigid south. Only the very rich of Belém go there with any frequency. Everyone else takes the bus to Brasilia, if they really have to. That takes two and a half days. New York is an impossibility. Paris so remote as to not exist at all. Although I still hear people talk about it occasionally in the tone usually reserved for speaking of jewels, or jaguar pelts, or other endangered or near-destroyed objects: *Paris*.

Instead of the Seine and its bulb-garlanded tourist boats, I have the *açaí* boats landing at 11:30 each night. The berries are brought to Belém from all over the mouth of the Amazon. Some evenings I watch them come in to their docks below the Círculo Militar, the army fortress compound. They look like migrating eels: long thin boats, their cyclops' eyes piercing the night like fireflies. When the boats land, small, dark men scuttle to unload the heaps of fruit.

Açaí. I love the name, its medicinal, swishy sound. I like the taste even more, even though on their own the purple berries are far too sour. They can be mashed with sugar and mixed with manioc to make a purple couscous. More often, though, they are sugared and used to make ice cream the colour of virulent bruises.

At these moments I don't feel I occupy a periphery, somewhere dreamed of only by centuries of scientists and merchants and other alarmists, but forgotten by everyone else. I feel I am at the fulcrum of the universe. Nowhere on earth is as flat and broad and significant as this part of Amazonia. All along the two-thousand-kilometre length of the river, the elevation barely rises 200 metres. I really believe those *National Geographic* sentences, the ones that tell me I am living in the lungs of the world.

* * *

They are having breakfast. As always, he seems nervous when he eats, trembling, plucking at his napkin as if it were a chicken that needed to be defeathered.

"The newspapers in the Amazon are such crap." He points to the corner of the table, where one of the body-count papers that dedicates itself to corpses and accidents lies in a frustrated heap.

"You knew that before we came here. Why don't you go out and buy the *Folha de São Paulo*?"

"Because my Portuguese isn't as good as yours. I can only look at blood and guts pictures."

"I'll translate for you."

"No thanks. I'm dependent on you for enough already."

"You'd rather complain."

"I would." He smiled. "Oh *God*," he groans. "Another story about the damage anthropologists are wreaking. This is a great joke," he grins. "What's a typical Kayapó family? A mother, a father, five kids and an anthropologist."

She moans and rolls her eyes.

"Why don't we go to Salinópolis this weekend?" he says. "I want to go to the beach."

"I don't think we can."

"You mean we can't even afford that? A weekend in Salinópolis, the Daytona Beach of the northeast?"

"This apartment costs a lot. You know that."

"So," he shrugs. "Let's move."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

She pauses, and looks down at her hands. "I need the view."

* * *

We can't afford to go to Salinópolis on the Atlantic so we go to Icoaraçá, a good river beach only half an hour by bus out of town. For a river beach, it's okay. There are not many piranha, and almost no chance of *Bilharzia*—the water is too swift-moving. There are crocodiles, though.

The beach is crowded on the weekends with Amazonian families and their children, who glisten like lizards. The fresh water seems heavy and sticks to my skin like mercury. We drink chilled coconut milk, he meets sylph boys at beach bars. In the distance I can see the low flat shape of Marajó island. I wonder where the crocodiles are.

* * *

"I have to go out."

He eyes her. "Okay."

"Do you want me to bring anyone back?"

"No," he shakes his head far more emphatically than he has done in a long time, except during sex. "Just go out and enjoy yourself."

He hardly goes out now. On the nights when he used to accompany her ventures into the city, they would sit in the Bar do Forte, built on the battlements of the old *fortaleza*, the one that overlooks the Ver-O-Peso market. The Fortaleza once defended the entire Amazon against the

English and the Dutch.

From there they used to watch ships sliding like giant glass structures over the Amazon. At night the river and sky are a seamless horizon of black, occasionally sequined by the lights of the massive dock cranes, which warp and wink like the eyes of dinosaurs. Some nights they would go on to the Clube Lapinha, which she knew Belém natives avoided. Tourists are always fascinated by it because there are toilets for three sexes: Men, Women, and Gay.

Now she has become so used to being alone in the city that she finds his presence obtrusive. Other men never look at her in the street when he is with her. She is treated deferentially in bars and restaurants. She knows why: with him she is a *Senhora*, an attached woman. Historically, women's survival in the Amazon depended upon having the protection of a man, she knew. Either that or they could become prostitutes. Most of the time he stayed in their apartment, reading Classics on their eleventh-floor balcony. She would come home to find him in the chair, sometimes asleep, with Ovid and Aeschylus and Plato and Cavafy sitting at his feet like puppies.

She misses seeing him in action, out in the world, because his being was calibrated on the cusp of action-obsessiveness and languor, and she knew this was unusual. When he did things, even if it were just buying fish at the Ver-O-Peso, he did so decisively, and with a need that was ragged, intense and controlled at once. He kissed her like that too, but there was also a languor in his limbs and lips. He let them linger on hers until something inside her became insupportable. If she could X-ray him and see his innards she was sure she would see something that was in the process of melting. That's how he felt when he touched her: frozen maple syrup or chilled chocolate warming up, returning to its natural viscosity.

When she enters the air-conditioned office that afternoon, the one that pays her her meager salary, or into a travel agency to investigate flights they cannot afford, her body breathes a sigh of relief. Her business done, she goes back onto the cracked pavements—insane carapaces driven by rain and rot—and into the shoe stores tumbling onto the sidewalk.

The Organization of American States is in town. Heat-stunned gringos wander the broken pavements, avoiding crevasses, stepping delicately, like storks. All the minor statesmen and their acolyte bureaucrats have convened on the city for six days. She tries to avoid the North Americans; their pale and fleshy faces remind her too much of what she herself is. Still, just for a moment, she wants to go home.

The nights have gotten worse, not better, since they came to Belém. Most nights now he has to uncurl her from her screwdriver sleep postures.

In the middle of the night all her muscles contract, as if she were a stroke victim, and she doubles up upon herself. He prises the pillow out of her hands. He sits at her thighs. The click-click sound of the docks filters in through the window. Light from the halogen floodlights used to illuminate the nighttime loading makes its way in too, bathing them in a sick hospital yellow.

He sinks down onto one elbow and swings his legs up on the bed. All this time he says nothing, but begins to stroke her hair, moving it off her forehead. Then he lays himself out against her and straightens her out, limb by limb, like a store mannequin.

From time to time she would picture herself, or at least try to, with someone else—someone who returned her love at its exact pitch and frequency. Then she would replay their conversations. Every time she talked to him, she felt she was going somewhere he had never been before. No one else had ever given her that sense of possibility, and she clung to it even while she understood that its promise was false in the way that a journey undertaken in a dream does not really get her anywhere, at least not when judged by the moment of waking.

Although he is in a way every inch the Western man, his smooth limbs and chiselled face suggesting infinite progression, she can tell he is becoming increasingly dark, interior. Just talking to him is like entering an abandoned labyrinth. He often takes off his glasses to look at her, and even in the moment she would wonder if this was a calculated move of his, as if he knew the effect of the jade-threaded clarity of his eyes.

Still, she can't imagine he has any need to manipulate her. They can sit together happily for hours on the couch, facing the window of their apartment, their fingers twining and untwining. She runs her fingers through his hair, rubs the point on his neck where his hair stops and his skin begins. Her body flushes hot, just from this activity. If he falls asleep beside her, their thighs running alongside each other, she fingers his eyelashes very lightly. They are extraordinarily long, like a camel's. She runs her finger through the whorls in his ear. She can do this for hours and not be aware of time passing. Then she might look up, suddenly, and see that outside the sky has turned to aluminium: rain's coming.

The OAS conference had brought opportunistic traders from all over the mouth of the Amazon. After she encountered a glut of Canadians, she walked down to the Ver-O-Peso. Under a massive Amazonian sky, pelicans fell like bombs into the brown waters. Or they waited opportunistically with the hunch-shouldered posture of diplomats next to the fish stalls. Some of the pelicans were as tall as the women minding the tattered stalls. The late afternoon light was silk-washed. The sun would go down in less than an hour.

“*Senhora, Senhora.*”

She turned around to see a man, his face creased with the lines of too many false smiles. His forehead wide, his hair cut by some maniac. She could see immediately that he was a *caboclo*—of mixed indigenous and Portuguese blood. He wore a brown-stained white sleeveless shirt and blue nylon shorts. On his feet were flip-flops.

“I have something show you,” he said, in burring English, and winked at her.

“*Qué?*” She pretended not to understand.

He switched to Portuguese.

“*Vem conmigo.*”

She did not know why, but she went with him. It was not a safe face, but she went with him anyway.

He turned his back to her, bent down, and reached into a box carefully, all the while whispering, “*Minha amor, minha amor.*”

From the box he pulled what looked to be an animal.

She stood back. The first thing she noticed was the smell: like rotting leaves. The animal’s fur was grey and wiry and was covered with what looked to be a dark green slime.

The animal faced the man, gripping his shoulders with two short arms. Then it rotated its head, very slowly, and turned to look at her. Its eyes were the colour of black licorice streaked with amber. Its stare was inquisitive, and sad.

“Don’t cry, *Senhora*. Here, she’s yours.”

She approached the animal. Its nose was squashed, button-like. Over its eyes was a band of dark hair, like a raccoon’s mask. She realized its benevolent expression came from its upturned mouth: two thin black lips, smiling.

“Only thirty dollars, *Doña*,” he said, addressing her as Mistress.

She took it in her arms. The animal gripped her shoulders with its claws. She was made nearly delirious by the heat and damp coming from its body.

She turned to the man, smiling. “She’s beautiful.”

The sloth gripped her just like a child, each leg splayed on her hip bones, its claws, snug but not biting, on her shoulders. It seemed to move very slowly, like a computer-generated animal.

She could hear the thump-thump of its heart. It was very slow. The sloth had extremely long claws. She felt her skin being serrated, but the sloth did not puncture it.

She looked into its face but wasn’t sure what it was she could see there. Its nose touched her forehead: it was hot and wet. The sloth put its nose in her ear and she flinched, then smiled.

“She’s trying to tell you something,” the man grinned. Then he pried

the sloth off her body.

“Thirty dollars, *Senhora*.” He put the animal back in the box.

“Wait here.” She thrust fifteen dollars into his hands. “That’s a deposit. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

She wanders in and out of the afternoon rainstorms, going nowhere. She stands beneath their waterfall wetness, emerging from time to time into curtains of sunshine.

Near dusk she finds herself in Lourdes’ neighbourhood. She can’t remember going there. She has no appointment to meet her. He doesn’t need a boy tonight.

She passes through the undergrowth of the house and into the courtyard of neatly arranged tin shacks. As she descends the stairs she expects to see him there on his slum divan, but Gorda is not there today.

She arrives at Lourdes’ shack and, as there is no door, steps into the gloom of the shed. She steps back, blinks a couple of times, re-enters. By this time the girl has lowered the gun and holds it limp, at her thigh. She blinks again. It is unmistakably Lourdes. She looks just as she has always looked: a twelve-year-old girl, long-legged and intelligent.

“What are you doing with that?”

The girl shrugs. The gun falls out of her hand, thumps to the dirt floor.

“That’s loaded. You never, *ever*,” she steps forward to take Lourdes’ face in her hands. “You *never*,” she nearly squeals, her voice still constricted, “let a loaded gun drop on the ground, do you hear me?”

Lourdes doesn’t look at her.

“If you load a gun then you use it. You point it at someone and you *use it*.” She is shouting now. She is shaking the girl by her shoulders. “Who were you going to shoot?”

The girl goes limp as a mollusk, comes to her, slides against her body.

“Oh, Ana.”

She has to remember that this is not her real name, only what she told Lourdes she was called. She feels guilty, suddenly, that this girl who trusts her thinks her name is something that it is not.

The girl puts her arms around her chest. Her flat body pinches itself against her breasts. She takes Lourdes’s oblong face between her hands.

“Who were you going to shoot?” Lourdes lowers her eyes. “Who?” She shakes her.

“I don’t know.”

She felt sad, immediately, as soon as the girl had said it. She didn’t need to know who Lourdes had intended to shoot. She didn’t need to ask that question.

Later that night, as they lie entwined together, listening to the fizz of rain

on the tin roof, Lourdes stirs, turns to her, only a shard of her face visible in the moon's knife coming through the window.

"Will you do something for me?"

She fans the girl's eyelashes between her index and third finger. Lourdes closes her eyes.

"I'd do anything for you."

She unbuttons her shirt and reaches both arms to her back, unclasps her bra. She releases her arms and lets her breasts spill out. Lourdes moves her mouth toward the nipple, closes over it.

On her breast the mouth is delicate, unscarred. It does not feel like a child suckling her breast. But it feels very different from when he does it. He does not close his mouth over her nipple softly, but devours it, seems to want to swallow it. Lourdes stays like that for what seems like hours, until she falls asleep with the nipple in her mouth.

For the first time since she met him, she sleeps with her body relaxed. No one has to come in the night and pry her apart. About an hour later, after the rain has stopped, she gently extricates her breast from the girl's open mouth, picks up the gun from where it had fallen, and leaves.

Much later that night she sits in the Tip-Top ice cream parlour licking her favourite flavour, the bitter-lemony *cupuacú*. Families take desultory promenades around the square to the rattling sound of axle-battered cars: combatants of too many Belém potholes. The sky is clear, but it is a sideways, neon night.

In the park, women are arguing with their boyfriends. The women always take the initiative in an argument, she observes. The men are pliant, as if drugged with heat-stunned lassitude. They go along with everything until they start drinking.

She has only a thousand cruzeiros left. Not much. She has spent the fifteen dollars she was going to use to buy the sloth on ammunition.

In the window she sees the reflection of her face. Then she sees his reflection in their apartment window, superimposed on the river-cranes. The cranes are sawing the sky, groaning forward and back. On the bed, he is thrashing back and forth, too.

I didn't mean to hurt you.

He is barely conscious, and gasping.

"We're the same," she whispers.

Then she mops up the blood, makes him a torque bandage, takes him to the hospital. Everywhere she looks in the ward, malarial men lie like exhausted bread loaves. Whenever anyone is shot in the conflicts of the garimpo, the nearby gold mines, they are taken to the hospital in Belém.

"To your knowledge, has your husband ever had Dengue, Malaria, or HIV?" they ask when she fills out the forms. In Portuguese, HIV sounds

like *Ash ee va*—soft, she thinks. Almost benevolent.

“We’d like to keep him overnight for observation and run blood tests,” the doctor tells her. “It’s just a grazing. He was lucky. Or it was meant to be just that.”

When she has told him the story about the robbers, the doctor shrugs.

“It happens a lot. And you live in a rich neighbourhood. You should move downmarket. You can take him home in the morning.”

The doctor looks at her, sudden and sharp. “You’re not going to report this to the police, are you?”

She shakes her head.

“Good.” He clips a piece of paper onto his board, turns away from her. “That would get you nowhere.”

She makes sure he is asleep, then she walks out of the hospital, catches a taxi and asks the driver to take her to the ice-cream parlour.

* * *

As I work my way through the riot-coloured ice-creams—*Açaí, Cajú, Cupuacú, Castanha*—I run through the possibilities of what I have begun to call ‘My Future.’

I will go and live with Lourdes and her brother. We will save our money, the three of us, and I will take them to Miami. There they will learn English, and instead of a prostitute, Lourdes will become a dark-skinned secretary in an air-conditioned office.

I will leave this city. I will swim out to the one or two ships that still make the journey up to Manaus and back again and then are spit out the mouth of the giant river and go to Port-of-Spain, to Monrovia, to Panama. There I will meet a Belgian businessman in a bar and we will become lovers and he will pay my passage home. Or I will go with him to Antwerp and work there for the tourist board, guiding English people around the city.

I will use all my savings to buy the sloth. I will return her to the forest. I will journey for many days in small boats, dependent upon the kindness of the people in the river settlements. They will understand what I am doing. They will help me. Even if by that point I smell of piss and green slime because the sloth will not let go, even at night, of my shoulders.

* * *

He had been out of the hospital for a week. The boy had just tripped into his trousers, closed the door. That night, like many nights before, she sat in the corner of the room, the one beside the tall faux-French window. She sat so that her hair was brushed lightly by the once-white gauzy curtains as they swung in the breeze. In front of her was the bed which took up an obscenely large area of the room. Her legs—tanned, mosquito-bitten—were curled up underneath her, and she sunk down as far as she

could into the chair.

She loved to watch his face when he came close to orgasm. It twisted into an almost phantasmagoric mixture of pain and waiting. Waiting, waiting...and then relief. Like the slow opening of a flower, or the open mouths of bears, rabbits, small animals as they died, caught in the steel trap in the winter forests of her childhood.

She could do this too. It wasn't just the boys she brought to him. They were made for each other. His penis was thin and long, delicate. She was small. They fit each other perfectly. Sweat even ran down their chests in synchronized rivulets.

In the morning she would change the dressing on his wound. This would bind them more to each other. There was nothing about him that was foreign. Not his ruptured skin, the scar he would always carry. Every part of his anatomy seemed made to inhabit her body. And it had been even better between them ever since he had told her she was not what he needed.

He would watch her change the dressing on his wound, following the complex instructions from the doctor, which he could not understand because his Portuguese was bad. At these moments, he looked at her face with an expression approaching benediction.

Later that night she lay beside him on the big bed, so hot she thought she might be breaking into a fever. She rolled over, away from him, careful not to touch his body.

In the morning, she got him a glass of water, took his gold-rimmed glasses delicately in her hands and cleaned them with her silk scarf. She replaced them quietly on the bedside table.

Quietly, without looking him in the eye, she went around the room gathering her things. She stuffed them in her bag. The claustrophobia was getting worse with each second, but she tried not to appear rushed. He looked like a wounded animal, faultless and uncomprehending, lying tense and waiting for the moment to be over, the one when she would close the door behind her.

These Are Ghost Stories

Elyse Gasco

*He who cannot howl
Will not find his pack...*
Charles Simic

These are ghost stories hunters tell of the ones that got away. Not the ones that almost got away, that seemed only to momentarily blend with whatever they were hiding behind, the browns and yellows of hunting season. Nor the ones they did get with crisp, clean shots that made these hunters drop their guns with a yelp and dance a weird, manly minuet. Choked with joy they slap each other's strong backs; but these are not the stories that haunt them. The heads they hang above their fireplaces, quietly stunned, professionally stuffed, lovingly preserved, these are just whores to them, easy prey that seemed almost to mount themselves willingly on the den walls. No, they tell stories only of the ones that stared them down and outran their bullets and seemed to disappear magically into the woods; or the ones that made mud and shrubs, fallen trees and sudden storms appear from nowhere; or the ones that in freak confrontations and terrible bellowing escaped with the rifles hitched to their antlers. These are the ones that keep them up at night, thinking they hear animal grunting somewhere, respectfully loathing the ones who would not be cowed.

* * *

Realise that these are days of strange imaginings. The eyes of people you know; the eyes of strangers are flat as the side of an eel. Those with myopia are letting their glasses hang from their necks on string, preferring the soft edges of blurred objects. No one can decide if the affliction is insomnia, or just too much sleep. Faces seem creased, like tangled bed sheets. The sky of night and day seems just the same: a soft grey—the night not quite dark enough, the yellow of the day somehow gagged. Someone in power is putting up signs that say: Just keep busy.

In a dream, great bombs explode a zoo. Iron bars are blown from cages and the rubble makes bridges across the moats of the big animals. Lions

meet up with hyenas again; eland and musk oxen, oryx and ibex nod their heavy heads to each other in greeting, and free, they run straight towards the fire.

The Head is disenchanted with the world. Cameras catch him sleeping, the sensitive microphones pick up the guttural snores and the laboured breathing. Sometimes he appears just as a yawn, the wide opening of his mouth, the silver of his fillings, the strands of saliva, his sour breath fogging up the cameras when they get too close. I guess I am just bored, says the Head to his people. Complete ennui, he says, smiling at his awful accent. The Head is usually shy and sleepy and so everyone is surprised when he calls the press to gather round and listen well. He yawns and says: I am too tired to name this war. And so he announces a contest and suggestions are to be mailed in to a certain media station, or dropped into a metal box at the local supermarket. The Head wonders about the theme music. The only thing he knows for sure is that there should be oboes, but no flutes.

* * *

Mark this. It is the year your magical birth mother, the one you hunted down and captured in an impressive display of prowess (okay, maybe it wasn't really prowess, maybe you only came upon her like a dog catcher), declares that she has nothing left to say and stops talking. It is also the year that too many people are having near-death experiences without ever actually dying, without actually experiencing any real bodily harm, no straining or bursting organs, no blood or draining fluids, not even rotting gums or paper cuts. Just people that suddenly and absolutely in the middle of their lives unfasten themselves from their ordinary moments and launch their tiny spirits like shuttles high above themselves. It is as though everyone is filled with a great wanting, a hunger to float high above their bodies and look down on the world with a cool and lofty detachment, that someone says is like being the moon.

A woman wades through the water, her ankles and shins slick with black oil; around her sea birds, their greasy feathers plastered to their bodies, stiff like little soldiers. She describes lifting off out of her body—not exactly flying; more like a rising (bubbles to the top of a glass)—and a clear white light and smooth friendly hands that reach to her in love. A child, a television, a gun and a bad joke on every station; a woman sells him a car in her underwear and suddenly he is moving like a ghost train through a tunnel and all around him he hears voices saying: We love you. A man steps over a body in the street and describes a rush of clean wind, a light that called itself love and a sudden soaring sense of peace that fills him up like medicine in a syringe.

Some blame it on the gaping ozone layer. Still others insist that finally the opaque film between the living and the dead is dissolving, running down like cheap watercolours leaving clear white spaces. There is even talk of evolution and metamorphosis, likening it to the great slimy hoist from sea to land. But everyone that has been there is eerily unafraid of death; the suicide hotlines are jammed, and no one is wearing a seat belt.

It is also the year you abandon your impossible collages—wood on paper, lead on silk; things that pull everything out of shape and hang mean and heavy, like teeth from a thread of skin, it makes your gums ache just to look at them—and begin carving tools and amulets for the new millennium, believing that there must be something you can make with your hands that might stop the world.

* * *

I love you, says the Head one night in your living room, terrifically awake for a few brief seconds, throwing out his arms to the world. I love you, he says again. And don't you always hurt the ones you love? This is a rhetorical question and not a contest, and so no one is expected to mail in a response.

* * *

The first thing you do is forbid the word 'love' in your home. Because lately, when you look at your man, all you feel like doing is hunting, and except accidentally, you've never killed anything before in your life. Maybe it is because he is already wounded that you pick him out from the rest. Maybe it is because you can smell the rawness in his flesh. But lately, when you look at him, you sing an improvised song, a melody that might lull him to take a few steps closer even though he can smell the danger everywhere, a song that shifts the wind just the right way so that you can ask him—deer, hog, wild-animal husband—if on this day he would be willing to die for you. You know that he must be a willing victim, that this is a conversation of death; eye to eye you each admit that it is time, and that if the hunt does not go well, he might haunt you forever with his unhappiness. And when you eat of his flesh you will assume his power; but this you recognize is not love. You forbid the word love in your small world because really, what do you know of it anyway? Your heart, too busy with its own self-absorbed, monotonous lub-dub to pay much attention to anything else; trapped in its little rib cage, like a zoo animal, or behind the bars of a crib, like an infant, suckling and unforgiving—give me, give me. And you realize that sometimes a kiss is not a kiss, but just a way of stopping his mouth.

* * *

The Head says that if there is fighting it will be done shoeless, maybe

even naked. He flirts with the warriors, who eagerly strip for him, and fall over from exhausted love, their bloody lips puckered to the ground. He bats his sleepy eyelashes and runs a perfumed wrist across their throats, down their knobby spines. He mesmerises them with his flashy teeth and callused palms. They would throw their full jackets over puddles for him; they would pick him up and carry his body over oceans; all he has to do is mention love, and they are his. If only he was not so fickle and bored. If only he did not fall asleep so quickly. This army fatigues. This land forces them to stay hard. They practice marching barefoot. The earth is softer than they imagined. They kick at it to see if there is still life there, the way you roll a dead thing over, kicking at the belly, the inside of a thigh, just to make sure it isn't faking. But to toughen up their soles, the Head forces them to dance for him on thistle and stones, rocks and thorns and so they pound the earth.

* * *

You knew when you brought him home that he was not a poet, though his condensed language and short sentences fooled you at first, and if sometimes he couldn't finish a thought or even an emotion, well, maybe that was like not going all the way to the end of the page, a whole empty white margin just waiting there on the right side. Still, you are never quite ready for this quick change in rhythm, when the unstressed suddenly becomes stressed, when the heart does an unexpected dip that almost makes you lose your balance, that almost stops you dead. The truth is that sometimes when he smiles at you, you can see past the teeth and gums and jaw to the kind of skull he will be in the ground, and when he holds your hand, you watch his fingers close around your wrist and are surprised to see how little skin you both have, as though your skeletons were floating to the top of your body, bobbing there just below the surface. And in bed your bones clank together like dishes. You begin to call it 'The Death of the Passion', and you think there should be some ceremony for it: a ritual, a kind of frenzied dancing to celebrate this bloodless passing. So you are surprised to find this note in the center of your white pillow, pinned there like a voodoo doll:

*Shatter my heart
So a new room can be created
For a limitless love*

—A Sufi Prayer

You turn to him lying there beside you, straight as a wooden spear, but he is already asleep and the wind blows through him, whistling.

* * *

To stand near death and not go floating out of your body, this to you

seems like a real challenge. You know that there are people who enter their great family tombs to dust the bones of loved ones and murmur news and gossip to the powdered past. Here the living whisper love to the dead and no ghostly hookers stand at the doorway reaching out with perfumed hands for anything they can grab. Things are always dying and yet you can find so few remains. Where are all the skulls and bones? You are sure that things must have died in your backyard but you cannot find any evidence. Even the dogs are digging and coming up with nothing. Archaeologists have found bones with notches carved in them, bone slates inscribed as markers or reminders: maybe the lunar cycle, or perhaps a great ceremony or an anticipated voyage. It is not this primitive Filofax system that interests you so much, but that they walked around with bones in their pockets and pouches, so near death but with two dirty, hairy feet firmly rooted in the earth.

This is all that you are thinking as you watch him curl into bed naked, bent down on his hands and knees scraping the dog hair from the mattress and scattering it to the floor in little grey balls; magical hair that can keep growing for a little while even after death. These are your nighttime rituals: the hair and skin falling to the ground which you will sweep away in the morning, and the calling of the dogs back to the bed where one settles in his arms around him and the other brings her rawhide to you and settles across your legs to gnaw until she grows sleepy. These are bedtime ghost stories, this assembling and rearranging of bones, each shifting position, each movement, each turning, like different vignettes telling the story of night and morning. He turns to you tonight, and though you are aching for it to feel like ritual, frightening and mysterious, something done in a mask to the sound of drum beats, it feels only like a dark black habit, something a nun might wear. You know that sometimes by repetition there is magic, but tonight it feels only like two sticks rubbing against each other hoping for fire and instead only scraping your skin down to a dangerous point. You imagine him rising up and slipping out of himself, his deceitful spirit as oily and spongy as moss.

Someone blinds him with a white light and declares her awful love, and he doesn't want to come back. So you say to him—just for an edge of drama, just to give him something to think about: Sometimes I look at you and I can almost see what you'll look like decomposing. And this makes you think of your daughter who one day for your pleasure defined decomposing as Mozart in the ground with no songs left to write. You let him wipe you like a baby while you lie back and watch his pointy face, his jutting jaw lit up by the blue light of darkness. He says: You must stop imagining that this is the end of the world. You know that he is speaking

relatively, but you also know, just the way Einstein knew, that imagination is more important than knowledge.

* * *

The day your mother stopped talking she said that she believed that she never really had anything to teach you and so what was the point of going on, babbling, chitchatting; what were you really saying to each other anyway? Everything would simply be repetition and polite, but meaningless, conversation of things you already knew and that would only make you both sad and edgy. Some relationships are just filled with regret from the start. All that is possible, she said, all that has ever been possible between us, between everybody, is complete misunderstanding. Let's not embarrass ourselves. Let's just be very, very quiet. Think of it as an oath. This is the last thing she ever said to you, her voice grey and monotone as though she was trying to drive you away with her dullness. What does this word mean? your daughter used to ask, pointing at anything: the rows of spice jars, a newspaper headline, your doodles beside the telephone, the labels of her clothing. And you would think, how deep to ask the meanings when all you could ever give her were the sketchy boundaries of a word, and finally her turning to you and saying, It doesn't mean anything unless you think it does, does it? And that night she stopped sleeping in your bed, her warm wiggling body trying so hard to be still. In the end, you want to believe in the solemnity of your mother's vow, that maybe it is possible to make words sacred again, to start over by not speaking. She sends you only one letter and it says: Don't be sad. I looked it up in the dictionary: 'Mum' means silent, say nothing.

It seems everyone around you is growing weary and quiet. Lately it seems to you that even your man has run out of questions, as though he imagined that you were something already answered, an equation old and solved, as though after he asked you to marry him he ran out of questions, or maybe the ceremony made him think that two-word answers would always do. But like a weary troubadour he keeps reciting his lines by heart—how are you what did you do today good-night, and all that—but you wonder every minute where his mind is, what he thinks of when he looks at you, why he is no longer curious, and you worry all the time that he is just about to leave his body. You imagine he will be blameless, that he will say to you: I didn't fall out of love. I was pushed.

But no. This is not quite right. You have never really wanted his questions, have always been terrible at answering his questions, probing him for his most secret fantasies, his most embarrassing moments, his deepest hurts, and he gushed like a vein, and really, didn't you just lick up the blood or enact his desires, anything to keep from having to answer any of

these things about yourself. What you always wanted were his proclamations, to be emblazoned by his voice, sung into existence like some tribal custom that sings the sun back into the sky, the rocks back into formation, for him to know you or even pretend to know you without you having to say a word. You have always wanted to be somebody's song, some woman who he thinks talks to angels, who can call the stars down to her feet, who could walk with animals and tame everything she sees. Even if it was all wrong, even if it was all a lie, just to watch him trying to put you together in magical notes, something he could hum all day long. Don't you ever think of me during the day? you used to ask him. But he could only take the question apart, never put it back together. What did you mean by 'think?' What did you mean by 'you?' Sometimes he would see your anguish and say: Well, give me the lines, tell me what to say, start me off. As though you really were a song, but one that he'd forgotten, one that if you hummed a few bars it just might come back to him. But feeding him his lines, string by string like worms, strumming the chord to start him off or to clear his throat by, made it seem cheap, bird-like: Just open your ugly blue throat and I will feed you myself. You have always wanted him to be, to be, to be an empath your daughter says, and you wonder how she knew what you were thinking. Yes, an empath or a prophet, at the very least a Fury, something that wanted to follow you around, that had the stamina to haunt you. But you can even become bored of a haunting. Surely, you must get tired of your ghosts and devils. Oh, the toilet is just overflowing blood and slime again. And there goes that black gunk down the wall again. Sometimes, the minute you say, I know, you stop listening. You put a little cage around your bird man, and he puts another around you, and all the shuffling and movement is just swinging on the fake wood perch, whistling at each other through the bars. Sometimes when you watch him sleep you get a glimpse of how infinite he might be, and you remember a time when sleep was only necessary and not a way of flight, and you remember waking him up with your mouth, and how he called it deadly soft, and now you think to yourself: All the better to succubi.

* * *

It is amazing the people you let into your home. The anchor man throws out his heavy steel hook and then he is moored there, his great ship nearly taking over your living room. His face presses up against the glass porthole; his tie hangs flaccid. He reads a list of possible war names: The New Clear Vision, Atom and Grieve, The Real Thing. Children are fond of The Big Mac Attack: the hamburger meat of war, all of life melting like cheese in its boots, over a billion sold and all that, and extra ketchup for the pretend battle. But the Head, rightly so, is unsatisfied, and so the search goes on for the absolute pun, the last perfect metaphor, the simile

that will once and for all encapsulate what war is like.

* * *

For your birth mother you sew together pouches and purses to hold stones and charms and magic herbs. For her you sew up holes in stray socks, buttons onto stiff shirts, the gaping mouth of a down pillow that is spewing up feathers, suturing up anything that needs to be closed and tight. At night your man is called in on an emergency. A spayed dog has eaten through her stitches. Her people found her on their bed chewing away at her own guts, and in their panic they called to say that their dog was inside out.

And this is taped to the center of your mirror; where your eyes would meet your eyes instead you see:

*My desert woman, my she-wolf, my furious wife
I know your blood, your smell, your fire
And I follow like a hound to the borderland
of your desire, to the very tip of your knife*

* * *

The second thing you must do is pretend to die like a tree; the way they fake their sentimental, technicolor autumn passing, and hang around, a forest of twigs and wooden crosses, only to taunt and dazzle with their resurrection.

Your daughter is a little witch and you are endlessly enchanted by her, though she does not know yet what she can do. You want to make all her equipment by hand, her clothing, her tools, her jewels and talismans, so that everywhere she goes she will feel your palms urging her forward, the work of your fingertips, the imprint of you, massaging her instincts back into a muscle. She is near womanhood, the hood cloaking her in a new disguise that you are not used to, or, the hood that is the folds of the skin near the head of the cobra that expands before it strikes, or the hood that is your little hoodlum, a street toughy, unafraid—and now you know you cannot stop yourself, that thoughts of her send you free associating—her little red riding hood, the dark forest where she will teach herself pleasure and self-sufficiency. You know that there are tribes where a mother must prepare her daughter—not to close her up but to make her open, to tear the delicate skin, the thin membrane—with whatever: a fruit, a blessed branch, an oiled broom handle. And you imagine that it means that no man can ever plant his flag and claim discovery of that land, for surely there are natives living there. Or better

still, more magically, more bizarre, more horrible, the mother breaks through her daughter and says: As you tore through me so shall I tear through you.

But here, there are no initiations, no hot coals to cross, no animals to hunt, no way to prove our worthiness to ourselves, and all the scars we leave are unintentional. And all at once everyone stops talking and we must pay our shamans just to listen to us and even they are methodically silent. You spend your whole life questing after the woman you were born to and suddenly she decides to go mute and weird, like a cult leader you just can't get close to. The artist says there are no lines, only patches of colour, one beside the other, and you used to think this was true. Think of your daughter's soft translucent skin and blue blood pumping so close to the surface beside your thick veiny breasts, her puff of black smoky hair against your bronzed knee, her coral patch of lips easily whispering into your cold red ears. But now you can see the lines forming, as she delineates and you wrinkle slightly, from the smile curve of her hips to the smile curves by your eyes. It is more like an etching now, or a deep wood carving. You cut food together in the kitchen, preparing for a feast. She is deft with a knife and is in charge of the herbs. You watch her chopping mint and basil, the flash of the knife thrilling you, maybe there will be blood, maybe there will be a ceremony after all, and you can feel the expression on your face, that flat smug closed mouth smile, the love pumping out of your misty eyes, just like the soup-commercial mother, and you think: Please let me give her something better than chunks in a can. You want to give her spells, charms, fire, a howl to raise the hackles on any animal's back. She kisses your hands that are coated in garlic and sticky against her lips. She says: Mom, do you ever get that not-so-fresh feeling? She must see you getting ready to leave your body—the way your eyes are contracting as though suddenly you were blinded by a great white light, the way your skin is beginning to sag as though you were being sucked by a water bug—because she is tugging you down by the braid of your hair saying: It's a joke, Mom. A joke.

* * *

Maybe it isn't true that there aren't any rituals. Maybe it is only that like love, they are so personal, so highly individualized that they are almost psychotic. In the beginning, when the garden is lush and ripe with fruit and you still walk around naked for each other, you practice his leaving. Once, you left someone and you thought you could keep the evil spell of repetition away by practicing hard enough so that you might bore the Fates into leaving you alone. Oh yes, you say to the mirror, the sofa, the painted armoire, I understand exactly why you have to go. You practice being calm and accepting. Once you even offer to help him pack his things,

and your hands mime the precise folding of his shirts; but this makes you laugh, facing yourself in the mirror like that pretending to smooth out his invisible clothing, and your laughing scares you, makes you think that maybe you have roused the Fates with your horsey snorting.

Mostly you just let the words, Okay, okay, okay, roll through you like a marble, the smooth glassy coldness finally lodging in your narrow throat. But you sit down hard on the panic that threatens to blow like an overstuffed suitcase. There are only so many ways he can put the words. He is not a fancy man. He once called a pair of short lovers a couplet, but that was a long time ago. You imagine he could say in the quivering voice of a treacherous Columbus: I have found someone else. And this sudden finding, this accidental discovery will remind you of things lost, then found, between the crusty cushions of a sofa. You know that one day the dictionary might reveal that to 'discover' might actually mean to know more deeply, instead of this sudden coming upon, a chance landing, a lucky encounter of any kind. This world is crowded. There is bound to be a lot of banging and tripping, but that doesn't have anything to do with real knowing. And if he chooses these words, you will think: But I am hidden too. Find me. As for him, you cannot even imagine what his rituals are, how he manages to protect himself against you, what lonely trinkets he carries with him just to keep the worst away. And all our spells, the words we do finally say aloud, are confusing and dangerous—I love you and only you—as though this was a good thing. Words are starving you, making you skinny with their veiled sustenance, like that graffiti that is sprayed across the alley wall: *Don't Eat Fast*.

* * *

A million things die in a day: the flowers in the vase; the thoughts on your tongue; the momentary moods; the flies trapped inside the window panes; a spider in your sink; cells; the wind; another day; all these things. Nothing is ever over and done with for good. You'll never eat enough to be full forever; the dishes just washed will only get dirty again. We celebrate and mourn in extremes. Only marriage and that strange rewinding of divorce. Only birth and the queer familiar nightmare of death. And over and over again we still have nothing to say. At your wedding no one talked to you. As you passed by in your short silk dress some women called you skinny, but your friends stayed drunk and detached and in all the pictures they are smoking and look angry. And not a single fairy was brave enough to touch you with her bony finger and warn you that in the years to come you would prick your finger several times and fall down dead, and when your dry dusty kisses could not save each other you would have to slough your scaly flesh; and which one of you would be strong enough to sit the vigil until one of you might smell

the mossy regrowth of your skin, the fruit fuzz of your new bodies? Well, what did you want? he asked scraping your back with the fancy loofah that night in the hotel room. From midnight until morning it was all water games, moving back and forth from the giant shower to the deep round tub, steaming, soaking, cooling off, parboiling like vegetables. Something about the water and the dark room, and the still lake of the tub pulling you under, your newly-heavy finger weighing you down like rocks. Submerged to your eyeballs you stared across at him like a frog, thinking that if this never starts it never has to end, thinking that neither of you were frightened enough, that except for stage fright there was not enough horror, that there should have been blood-red masks and beating drums, someone should have shaken a skull in your face, asked for some blood, wrapped you in snakes. You should have been able to dance your most horrible dance for him, your dress torn from your body, the whites of your eyes spastic and furious. The women should have beat their breasts, the men should have gotten down on their hands and knees to howl like wolves. In all the pictures you are smiling too wide and your gums look raw and swollen. I wanted to sweat more, you tell him. I thought I'd be hotter. I wanted it to feel like a fever.

* * *

Your daughter is writing you love notes. You find the crumpled beginnings under her bed: Dear Mother Earth; Dear mystical wife; Dear Nile queen; Amazon lover; Two-legged wonder. You are proud of your sorceress, the way she takes it upon herself to do the magic that needs to be done. Still, you think you might have taught her that there are some moments where it is best not to be swayed by just words. And then there is the sad way we make our children hold everything together as though they were some kind of embalming fluid. How to tell her that you really believe that second chances are the real afterlife, but that you need that bone-scalding feat, that wild deadly stampeding in your heart to pass through the initiation over to the other side of living. In her room you find her copy of *The Egyptian Way of Death*. You remember her brief fascination with mummies, the way she would recite sections on how best to keep a body as though they too were poems: removal of the brain, evisceration, first washing of the body, stuffing of the body. You open the book and read where she has underlined in red: "Special care was taken with the heart, which always had to be left in place. It is still to be found in most mummies, and though it is sometimes damaged by the embalmer's knife and sometimes grazed or gashed, it is invariably in the normal part of the body." You only hope that this could reassure her that despite all your nightmares and phantoms, that your heart is actually in the normal part of your body. Once your man took his daughter to watch an autopsy on an orange cat that died from a fat, clogged heart. She watched her father

rip through the rigid thorax and swore she heard mewing, but it was only another hospital cat moaning from a de-clawing. Could that really be her father, his sleeves disappearing there inside the cat's chest, pulling out organs, his hands covered in blood? It was just after that that the embalming book appeared in her room, opened to the picture of a stone sarcophagus in the shape of a cat. It is also the year that she practices holding her breath, and makes you count the seconds she can go refusing air. It's the stillness, she confides to you one night. That subdued silence where all there is is the drumming of your body beating in your temples, where everything stays the same until you feel you're about to blow. She is practiced at this deception. Sometimes when you think everything is fine, you look again and realize that she is not breathing.

* * *

Your daughter finds you in your studio filing the fine tip of a wooden spear. She touches the things you have made by hand: knives with strange carvings, poppets, brooms made from blackthorn or willow twigs, garters, crowns, silver half-moons, goat horns and drums. She takes off her shoes and the sawdust from the floor coats her sweaty feet. This month she wears red: tight cotton leggings that stick to her long limbs like the fluids—blood, birth, abortion—all running down to her small bony feet. When there is nothing doing, no weapons or charms to be made, she sits with you and memorises poetry. She read somewhere that prisoners and torture victims could keep themselves alive by reciting all the poetry they remembered, and ever since has made an effort to arm her private arsenal with words that might save her life. Today she brings word of the man she has named the Mad Rapist Killer. She names him like a cartoon monster, as a way to contain him, as though he was the only one and after him there would be no more. She gives him a name, a proper noun, but the police call him a subject, something you might take in school, something that always comes before the verb, verbs like to 'slaughter,' to 'strangle,' to 'butcher.' They give a fair syllabus for all who are interested. They say: The subject is Caucasian. The subject should be considered dangerous. And the experts are calling it ritual murder. She touches a stone carving, turns it over and over in her own etched palms. But before she can pocket the rock, take it like a talisman, before she can tell you that she is not afraid of anything, that she sleeps in her own bed now alone for a while, before all this, you carry her out to the night to claim your block like dogs, like bitches or queens, raising your tails, rubbing up against trees, sticking your face into bushes, knocking over garbage cans, making her bark: It's my world too! She is reluctant at first and then quotes for you: "*Beware, beware, blah, blah blah, and I eat men like air.*" She grows in spurts, your little witch, a faucet turning herself off and on. One moment she is timid, nodding her head politely to the night moon, a

horrible habit she must have learned from you, that good manners might keep her safe. You do not want her to be this twelve-hour woman, this Arctic summer, this inverted vampire that night cannot enter, who gives up her blood instead of asking for it. And then she is something else, singing with you an improvised off-key dirge, howling: It's my world and I'll cry if I want too, her legs wide and powerful like a jockey's, her whole body, her ass to her hair, bouncing and shivering like a race horse. She is animal and rider, one powerful, snorting beast, her nostrils wide taking everything in, and in your new world there is no room for rider and steed: it is all one powerful monster. She puts her lanky arm around your waist and asks: Is mankind an oxymoron? You tell her that as far as you know oxen are usually castrated and docile, and when she laughs and you see that she is about to tell you of her love, you cover her mouth with your cold hand. A public service announcement is pasted to the wall at the end of your street. It reads: We are all victims of child abuse.

* * *

Despite the gravity of the situation, the Head admits that the moon is his mistress. He loves her bald, cool body and no one can resist the press of sex, who photograph the Head drooling at the night sky, throbbing at the thought of something new again.

* * *

Your man is not going anywhere. This is only a small, natural death that you both misinterpret as the end, like clapping before the poet is finished, or calling rain 'mean weather'. But you will not bury these moments or pat them down with leafy silence in the churning earth. There should be passages for these mountains, a pass or bypass to make your brick heart bigger, and tents for the nervous travellers to rest in. Even snakes must have a place to leave their skins. And so in imitation of other passings, you sit your family down to the feast of the Death of Passion. You lift a wine glass to the man and say: To the regrowth of our flesh. You eat root vegetables with herbs and crisp bread with dripping cheese, things that remind you of the pungency of sex and the crustiness of bed. He wipes his mouth that is stained by beets. He begins: I am dead to you because I am not a poet. I am dead to you because I have never cried. I am dead to you because I have refused to read your mind, to give you what I know you need. I am dead to you because I confused giving with giving up, and what I thought I had, I halved. You tilt your glass and spill the wine drop by drop on the white cotton cloth. You say: I am dead to you, because like God, I tried to make you in my image. I am dead to you because I idolized and then got bored. I am dead to you because I gave you fences and borders and then pointed my weapons. Your daughter watches her parents die but she is undisturbed. The bodies still look so lifelike, and the hearts

are all in the right place. And she writes you only one more note in a script that looks so much like his that for a moment you are forced to wonder: *I'll talk. I'll talk. I'll say anything you want.*

For seven days there is mourning and you speak of each other only in the past. I never knew your mother practiced my leaving, he says to his daughter. I never knew your father dreamed in colour. With you, says your man to your ghost, all I wanted to do was sleep. Without you, I cannot sleep at all. I never realized, you say to your phantom man, how often I closed my eyes when you spoke. Your daughter dusts your photographs and pretends to cry. One day, in your dark, silk pocket you find the beginning of something, just a few words quickly scrawled in your own handwriting—the sad-eyed bride—and you wonder if you've only been fooling yourself. Meanwhile, the highways and city streets are full of new signs. A shoe company puts up a billboard that says: Just do it. A camera company shows its power with a great zoom lens and the words that say: Just shoot it.

* * *

This happens before the music is composed, when the players can't decide if they are going to go major or minor, and when the war remains still unnamed. On the longest night of the year you tell your new man to put on his iron long-johns and follow you out to the wild. You drive to where there are still trees left and go out in a weathered canoe to find yourself two small islands. After your great dying, little green buds of knowing appeared on your winter bones, and in the silence of your mourning you smelled life coming at you like heat, musk and animal sweat. Your daughter sits between her ghostly parents who have died and come back unafraid. Your man steers his Mad River canoe, and the delirious cries of the loons make the lake a strange asylum. Your family sits like quiet Indians, the dogs keep a watchful eye for shore, and just the sound of the paddles breaking the water stirs the stillness. You leave your daughter at a small rocky island in the middle of the lake. The dogs, loyal and sharp as wolves, want to go with her, but tonight she is alone. The dogs watch her disappear, barking after your girl, who is leaning there against that twisted tree (the only thing you really saw before you turned away), barking as she fades to such a brief smudge that some hunter with bad eyes might wonder, Is that an animal? You do not go far: another island just across from her. If only you were wolves, you think, as you and your man pull the boat up the rocky shore. It could be so easy just to shake her by her tangled fur, her scruffy neck, to teach her courage and freedom, to give her the great earth as a home and a howl to match it. Tonight she is the initiate. You made her tools by hand and wood, a string of glass beads to see through the night, but that is all for ceremony, props for a

ritual, and the rest is up to her. You set up camp, the tent, the fire, and turn circles on your small land to see if there is anything else to do. This need to keep busy is an infection; your hands begin to tremble from emptiness, your mind sputters barely formed ideas in withdrawal. What did you ever do with stones and leaves, cold cold water and high unclimbable trees? You do not know what anything is called, not the names you've given it all, or the names they've given themselves. You know only the words for travellers: leaf, mosquito, crawly thing, dirt, spider; something slimy. But nature puns and jokes and you are just not fluent enough to hold a conversation. The dogs have made it from one end of the island to the other and back again. Burrs and seeds catch in their fur, and they eat small blue fruit from a low branch. Their mouths hang open; surely they are laughing. They do not get bored or disenchanted. Everything they do is as though it is for the first time. It is already dark and still you do not see the light of fire across the water. You think of bears, though you know it is unlikely, but you force yourself to stand it and think: Let it be bears then. It would be an honour. She has a strong life force; it is right that you ask her for it. Your man has finally agreed to be your empathy. He holds your head in his hands and his fingers smell like smoke. He says only: Howl.

On a flat rock that juts out over the lake you howl with your man, in loneliness and jubilation, in greeting and in fear. The dogs join the barking, and the whole anxious chorus sounds like a pack of many more than four. You watch and howl and think of matches and dry wood, sudden flames, deep embers and easy winds. Finally, a small glow, a little orange star appears on the island, winking at your restless pack that stops you all dead in mid-howl. You imagine that she is reciting the poems to keep her safe (maybe: *out of the ashes I rise with my red hair...*) You imagine the warming of her fingertips, the singed smell of her hair, the bonfire smoke in her clothing, the smell of the phoenix; you can almost see the white glint of ash flapping through the air. The dogs lie down to sleep. Your man holds your firm hand.

* * *

And somewhere else a bored, unshaved Head imagines that he is the burning bush that won't consume itself. He holds his lovers in a necromantic embrace and tells them not to move. He is disturbed by the sound of his own heartbeat, and wears thick sweaters to keep it muffled. People insist that there are ghosts in their midst and that they can see right through them. Their hands pass through their bodies as easy as reaching into a cold, clear stream, but they are too well trained and refuse to believe their eyes. An architect studies the neatness of cemeteries. And a zookeeper swears he hears the sounds of sawing in the night. At

the entrance to the national park is a cardboard moose that everyone mistakes for the real thing. They snap a few too many pictures before they realize their mistake. A great buck, his thick velvet antlers rising high above the bushes, passes unnoticed behind his decoy and disappears into the forest forever. But probably these are only ghost stories that hunters tell during a loveless season, about the ones that got away, the ones that disappeared into the green eyeball of the forest, the ones that refused to be had.

The Beautiful Children

Michael Kenyon

We had breakfast at Norm's around three in the afternoon, bananas and candy bars. The bananas were green and the chocolate was melting. We were thinking what a shock. We ate half the bananas and all the candy and talked about crossing the street. We talked about shoes. We felt good. Our shoes, what could you say about shoes? A wheelchair wheeled by the window, a beautiful cropped head loose as a balloon. The sky was dark blue and the sun hurt. We decided to have coffee. The place was full. We talked about what drives people, things like convenience, fear. We'd heard of this recluse who lived across town and wrote programs. We remembered eating whipped up egg whites, sweet and baked over ice cream. There were donuts on one side of the table, coffee cups on the other. This was a sunny day in our lives. Sugar trailed from the donuts to the cups, sugar round the rims and slicks on the surfaces. We loved pastel sprinkles. We were tired because we'd been hunting day and night.

We clutched to our hearts small bags of fresh holes and got out on the street. We ate as we walked. We wondered how long it'd take to become a different person, how long teeth would last and could you invent yourself. We talked about filling in pitfalls. Some of us were bored or had pain from what, or lack of what, we couldn't remember, or didn't want to. We could cut out anything with a knife. We had reason to live. We looked through a window and saw a baby being fed. We imagined chasing leaves blowing across a field. We remembered forests, some of us, and strange paths between familiar places. We talked about the recluse across town. The programmer. We'd go there, go see him maybe. We told ourselves stories of decay and of things growing out of decay. It all played.

We talked about shoes. We were on a corner we liked and watching the shoes going by and comparing. We couldn't keep track. We went to the end of the block and back. We had to talk about shoes. Big jets were chasing across the sky and we couldn't hear ourselves but we had to talk about shoes anyway. We were saying, Eye holes, laces, soles, heels. We were saying, Who d'you think you are?

Nobody looked at us. We couldn't touch one another, only our own

selves, that was true. We were saying, If you can't keep still, walk away.

We didn't want to help anyone. We made it so nothing changed, everything stayed the way we wanted. Pure. We clenched our teeth and talked about corruptions and total concepts.

We got back to shoes, haunted shoes. No one would pay attention. Shoes were too big or too small. We'd fall, maybe, and no one, not one of us, would check if that body still lived. It still played. Down there in the dark, under the cover we'd put over the pit. Shoes went on forever. We wondered when we'd turn into something. We couldn't stop there. If we ran no one would catch us. Some bodies were made to dance. We were skeletons with shoes. We were youth wasted on the young. We had fine little bellies. We were down at the heel. This was no place for children.

We sat on a bunch of crates and planks on buckets and some of us lay down and we passed the night sharing bottles and planning how to go about things, spending time on details. In the morning we saw stars crap out then sent someone to get information. We weren't staying where we were. If we decided to run, no one would catch us.

Nothing was wrong with us. We just couldn't feel anything. We had information people were hungry for, information about the universe. They didn't know. They hardly ever even tried.

We were walking down the block and one of us made a scoop shirt and we filled it with trash, butt ends, and grabbed handfuls and threw stuff at one another and bits of ash and leaf flew in our hair and we were laughing and choking, this dust so thick we couldn't see straight.

We played spit with a knife. We combed out the dirt, combed and combed. We had to wait a while then, but not long. We were always waiting around. To have what we saw. Then we didn't want it. We were stoned and nothing ever changed but the colour of the sprinkles. We collected what was left out. We had teeth that could bite through anything. We licked at sweetness, say sherbet, fudge, jam. We chewed garbage and lived. Our lips tingled. We were dangerous then. We walked down the aisles of a Superstore. We bit through what we stole and walked out empty. We bounced off cars and cracked windshields and lived. The invasion had begun. We were coming along the gully and we were savage.

We rolled down the hill and hit the wall of Norm's Donut Shop. We punched holes in the tires of cars parked in the alley. We went up the hill and skated down again. In Norm's we joked around. We waited for something to happen. Tow-truck drivers came in and gave us cigarettes. We talked about different things we'd eaten. Different ways we'd looked.

Jets in formation were flying overhead and we put hands over our ears. We had a big fight about whose hair was longest. We hustled out

and raided the northside dumpsters. Down at the Gardens we were propositioned. We practiced jumping off picnic tables. Finch lay there and didn't move. We put the body by the No Exit sign and next day it was gone.

We ran the show. We were as sweet as candy on blue days. We knew we were being watched. We saw that gas prices were going up, coffee was going up. We lost Robin. We went to the Gardens and lay under the fountain. We talked about nothing but the winter. Our minds filled with dreams of glory. No milk, no sugar, but lots of chocolate. We caught a cat in a bag. We were ugly and wanted friends. Our straps kept slipping. The wind from the west smelled like something else. We said we'd always be together. We felt connected. We snapped off young shoots and saved them. Our weapons made sense, they shone, ratcheted, whirred. We let the cat go. We attended a traffic accident. Crow got stabbed and bled and recovered. It didn't matter what we did. We didn't know what we were doing and weren't responsible for anything. We wore striped and big-brimmed hats. We lived in alleys and spent time in the Gardens and at Norm's. We could never make cash machines work. We hunkered down in the rain. When it got too cold to sleep we went to the Emergency. We leaned against the glass and watched it get white. We talked and talked until we had nothing to say, then went to sleep.

We were affectionate and easy, slim and attractive. We were enterprising. We were lyrical and flexible and happy. We were rapt. We were humorous, honest, intelligent, natural. We were enchanting and bubbly. We were ambitious. We were romantic. We were shaggy, energetic, considerate, lean and strong. We were curious. We were semi-chunky, hot, dirty and sassy. We were muscular. We were adventurous. We were pathological. We were incarcerated.

We were changing. We didn't know what we meant.

We went downtown to kick teeth. We had dinner at the soup kitchen. We used up all the toilet paper. People thought we were cute. We thought we were cool. We stole all the time. We said, What is it good for? Good question. And threw it away. We felt happy.

We went in the pool with our clothes on. We were just swimming in the water and they were trying to get us out, poking us with sticks. We had to kiss this stone face just at the surface for good luck. We were swimming out of the way of the sticks. We got bruised in the end. We had to leave our shoes behind. We saw a baby crawling by and we all started howling like a baby, just howling and howling. This was later, on the boulevard, when we got dry and it felt pretty good.

We were walking out of a cold night. We'd been out again all night. We were tired and bleeding from sores. A person saw us and took one of us back toward the sinking moon. We watched what was happening. We killed the person, fed the flesh to local pigs, and collected the bones in a bag which we buried in the Gardens.

We woke up screaming.

We had to keep warm.

For hours we passed houses with faces pressed against windows. Trees bent double in the wind. We were talking about the garden of bones. We told stories. "The Child Demands a Father." "The Two Fires." "The Dream of the Magic Birds." We moved to a new place between two buildings with warm walls, middle of the block, right across the street from the programmer, right across from the pawn shop and the TVs, right between two trees where birds slept. Moon rising through the branches. This was before the crack up, everything frozen. Iced-over dumpsters. We stole sesame for the birds all winter. It seemed like we'd all promised to die, as if we all wanted to die. Some of us did. We wanted to die. We didn't know what to believe in or how to fight for it. We didn't want to live. We began to die. First our beauty died. We watched the birds fly up in the afternoons, earlier and earlier. Some days they didn't bother to fly out at all. They perched up there and fluffed their feathers and down below we worried about being left alone. We put our backs against the warm walls and felt cold to the bone and talked about how this would pass, the alley, the season, one another, the world, the universe. We closed our eyes. We said, Far out, the way the plains roll south into long valleys between tall mountains.

Cold broke us up. We didn't understand. We couldn't think straight. We were sensitive to cold. We weren't wearing enough clothes. We begged bus fare to the river and stood on the bridge and watched the water stop. We wanted to jump. We ran to get warm. It was getting late. We saw a pigeon with one leg hopping about inside the fence around a construction site. It was getting dark. The pigeon couldn't fly. We went out next morning to try to find the pigeon but it had gone. We'd made a mistake. We put our hands in our pockets and talked about birds, ships, trains, the moon, wild animals, storms. We were looking for weapons. We were on our way to a place we'd never been with a message for people we'd never met and the message would kill us or them. We played with knives and felt nervous. We played again and someone got hurt. No one wanted to be the pigeon.

In the Gardens they were digging up bones. We stood outside the ribbon and watched them shaking their heads. There were green shoots coming up in the alley. The river got going. Some of us disappeared. Some others arrived. We went to the Emergency when we needed

something. We went to the airport when we got bored. We ran away when they chased us.

Nothing could stop us.

In summer we faded. Things seemed to roll about. Not us. The street. We were covered with travel dust. Buildings and people did a slight roll. We kicked a can. It rolled and shone. The street and the river and the alley all rolled up. Our eyes rolled. We made pig sounds. We got the shakes. We were unwashed and broken. We found a warehouse full of brown leather shoes with brass buckles. We recognized authority.

We relaxed. We put arms around one another's necks. Our ribs showed. We swam in the river, under the bridge. We were so hot. We stretched out in the water. We were nice and ready for the softness of one another. We were good buddies. We were dependable, durable, true blue. We looked up at everybody crossing the bridge and went under and pretended we were drowning and getting what we wanted. We almost seemed to have a life of our own. By night we were cool and rattled and jumpy. Our navels were deep. We could cut out anything with a knife, yet couldn't touch one another. We felt everything and it wasn't enough. People seemed breezy, asking for it. We wanted the feel of them. They looked cushiony and brushed and shiny. They looked like soft takes. We were shaking so hard we couldn't move. We had no heft, no substance, no finish. They were fluid. We hid. We were so light they blew us away. They were generous. They lived in colour. Our brown shoes weren't enough. We made welts on their skin with our knives. We were in a sweat. We were anxious. We were invisible. We picked them up. They let us. We cut vents in their clothes. We were smoke. They didn't feel a thing. We eased into them. They were firm. We finished them off. They were surprised. For a second we were soft, gentle, lush. Almost delicate. And they were strong, with an edge. We looked through the torn cloth at the shape of the welts.

Thistleheads exploded in the alley and we couldn't stop sneezing. We held our futures. Nights were short. Our faces were ugly and familiar and all wrong.

We held our shit for days, then held our piss for hours, and drank a lot of coffee. It was full moon. We went out to the golf course and crouched around one of the holes. Everything was blue. The sky came at us. We'd never felt so empty. We talked about climbing onto roofs and lifting tiles and reaching into houses and ripping out wires and starting the big fire. We talked about digging a deep long tunnel where we could live underground. We talked about stealing a train and filling a coach with dirt and having a garden with fruit trees. We talked about knife fights in

arenas in front of big crowds. We wanted to be caught and held. We wanted to die. We wanted to tear out throats. We wanted to hide away. We loved the people around us and wanted to attract their attention. We wanted to kill them and drink their blood and become them. We wanted to protect them. We wanted the skin of our bodies, the skin of our bodies, the skin of our bodies. We said, If you think you are, you're not. We said, If you think you do, you don't. We said, It doesn't work backwards. We are the same person. We said, This is now.

We hunted.

We were looking for the end of the gully. The gully was an alley in the gut. An opening in the skin. Knives would cut through. We wanted what was on the other side. True heart. We called bullet holes false navels. We counted the generations. We got lost in how many it had taken to make us. We got lost in the stars. The lights went out. We counted so many we got dizzy. We said the buck stops here. We said we didn't feel a thing. We said it's crazy up here, back in time, deeper and deeper, fewer and fewer, more and more.

In the alley green ferns broke the dirt we thought was cement. We thought, What a shock.

We went into the Emergency with our hats on backward. We took turns in the wheelchairs. We waited in the waiting room and watched TV. People were crying on the phone. We booted the vending machines and got stuff we didn't like. The donuts were stale. Security threw us out. We watched the rain. We stood in the bus shelter and watched the rain. Ambulances kept arriving and unloading. They kept mopping up the blood.

We had blades. We wanted to stay in the dark and play with the switches. We wanted to get caught and escape. We made bombs out of pipes and fireworks and bottles and gas and rags. We hid everything and collected more. At night we ran and ran. We were conspicuous and crazy and mumbled so no one knew what we meant. Jets were chasing across the sky. We closed our eyes and waited. We kept on talking, running in the dark, playing. We had nothing but plans. The worst winter. The best chocolate éclairs. We went to a zoo and ate ice cream. We had a fever and slept for a week. We got sick and died. We chewed pills and got pierced. We were a freak show. A TV crew followed us around.

They asked us all kinds of questions. We told them what had happened to us, the truth. The sky came at us in waves. We'd never felt so good. They asked did we know what country we were in. We gave them some information, a taste. They asked what country we'd like to be in. We gave them all our information, opened ourselves up. We waited to see what they'd do. What they'd offer of themselves in return. We had nothing left

except this wait and it didn't last long. They said we'd fallen through the cracks. We were lost. We were losers. We were victims, the final victims. They told us what country we were in. We showed our bellies. We showed our blades.

They showed us the movie and we couldn't believe how cool we were. Savages. It all played. Unbelievable, the way we moved. Our eyes shone. What could this world offer us? We'd been sold down the river and forgotten. We'd run away and ruined ourselves. We'd inherited a generation's loneliness. We were heroes. We were stars. In the movie our faces were dirty. At the end, the sun went down and we shuffled around in the dust of the alley. Coloured bits of light made a line across the screen and music started to play. We looked small. Brave. Everlasting.

We torched Norm's and visited the suburbs.

Church bells were ringing. The weather turned cold. Everything got quiet. Anything that happened, happened in front of us instead of down the block, across the street.

We felt uneasy. We had to do something. Nobody was home. Things kept going off by themselves. Alarms, sprinklers, lights, doors. What we had to do was get back downtown. This time, time was waiting, not us. There were no stores. The lawns were empty and green. We whispered about what there was to talk about. We broke some windows, took a couple of things we didn't recognize. We'd made a mistake. We couldn't find the church. We couldn't find a bus. There were no blocks. Streets went in circles. We tossed the stuff we'd taken. We felt stupid. Everything looked the same.

We found a shopping mall. People were going in, coming out. We talked to them. They gave us money. We used the phone. We talked to the operators. We went inside and looked at birds and fish and animals in tanks and cages. We pretended to listen to people playing music. We put the money in a hat. We were afraid. For the first time, we were afraid. We looked for a dark corner. There was a crowd by one door. We hung around and looked at earrings and teeth. We were last in line, for what we didn't know. We greeted one another like old friends. We said, How's tricks. When we saw someone we wanted we looked the other way. We had side vision. We had bodies and felt dizzy. We didn't look at what we wanted. We didn't want anything. We didn't want to go in. We didn't want to stay. We didn't want to go on. Everyone was staring at us.

We looked out of the glass doors at cars parked between the painted lines. The road out of there was long and straight. We talked till all we could hear was wind. All we could hear was wind. Everyone here was our enemy. The road was long and straight and lonely. A piece of garbage blew down the middle. We didn't like any of it. What we'd do was stick out our thumbs and show our bellies. We'd get a ride. We'd get a ride.

Heat

Andrew Hewitt

Absorbed in his Sunday comics, Peter did not notice the knock at the door, but he heard his mother's quick footsteps crossing the hall and looked up expectantly. A moment later his mother put her head into the living room and said curtly, "There's a salesman to see you." Peter's father was already on his feet. Salesmen were rare at the top of Indian Hill, and Peter's father liked to talk to them; it was one of his ways of keeping up with the world.

"Good morning!" he called heartily. "What brings you to the top of our hill?" He held the screen door wide.

"Good day to you, sir," the visitor said, stepping gravely into the hall. He was wearing a brown suit with a wide brown tie that curved over his chest and small belly. "I hope I'm not disturbing you?" He shook out a handkerchief and dabbed his cheeks and forehead. It was a warm August day and the man had presumably walked, lugging the heavy square block of his briefcase, all the way up the hill. "At any rate, I see that you're at home," he concluded with a smile.

"Well, this is Sunday," Peter's father shrugged. "There's always someone at home on Sunday." The Maynards did not have a cottage to go to or a boat; weekends in the summer meant lazing around the house, swimming in the backyard pool and reading the papers. "It's a shame that *you* have to work on a Sunday," his father observed.

"I'm not going to contradict you on that," their visitor said, giving his round head a wry shake. "But please don't let me take up more of your time than necessary. My name is Harrison, and I've just called in to show you something that *may* give you food for thought." As he said this, he turned and smiled at Peter, loitering at the other end of the hall. Quickly Peter withdrew to peep round the corner of the living-room door.

"How interesting," his father said. The two men were standing so close in the narrow space of the hall that their curving bellies almost touched, blocking Peter's view through the door of the street outside. His father wore a pair of old corduroy trousers and a checked shirt; even during the week he never bothered with a jacket and tie any more. Next to him the salesman looked sleek, prosperous, and talented, like a trained seal. His father placed his hand on Harrison's shoulder. "Come in, come in. I'm

always interested in what you people have to say. There's always something new on the market, isn't there?"

"In all my career," Harrison said, "I have only ever sold one thing: Common sense." He let this sink in before adding briskly, "However, there are always new ways of applying common sense, as you say."

"Right you are," Peter's father murmured, directing the visitor into the living room. Peter's comics lay open on the floor. He gathered them up quickly and stood near his father.

His father crouched and gripped his arms and said, "Why don't you get Mr. Harrison a tall, cold drink, and bring out a few cookies." He glanced up. "Will that suit you? A glass of juice, perhaps?"

"That's very kind of you," Harrison said. As Peter headed for the kitchen he heard the visitor add, "A helpful boy."

"Oh he is, he is," Peter's father confirmed. "Gets it from his mother. She does all the work around here. You'll see her in a minute."

Peter pushed through the swing door to the kitchen and found his mother mopping the floor with a dishcloth on the end of a stick. She dipped the cloth in a sinkful of soapy water, slapped it to the floor and moved it around vigorously with the stick.

"He most certainly will *not* see me in a minute," she declared. *Slap.* "As if I haven't got enough to do already. Opening the door to strangers. Waiting on them hand and foot." *Slap.* She saw Peter lifting the brown stone jug of fruit juice out of the fridge and put down her stick. "Here, let me do that." She filled three glasses and arranged them on a tray with a plate of dry, wafer-thin biscuits and carried it into the living room. Peter's father and Mr. Harrison were deep in conversation. Mr. Harrison's briefcase was on the sofa next to him, on the pile of newspapers that Peter's father had been reading. There were some photographs spread on the coffee table.

"If you would just move those to one side," Peter's mother said.

"Have a look at this," said his father. "Really, this is something." He held the sheaf of photographs up to her.

"Could I put this down first, please," she said curtly. She lowered the tray and wiped her hands on her apron and peered at the photographs without touching them. Mr. Harrison was smiling politely. Peter eased a biscuit into his mouth and another into his shirt pocket.

"I don't know what you're showing me, Harold," Peter's mother said. "Some kind of trick photography? Is that what this gentleman is selling?"

"I want to see," Peter murmured. His father spread the pictures out on the coffee table again, sliding the tray to one side. They showed a big, square house, much like the Maynards', with no other houses around it, but with melting, blue-green walls and red smudges in them for windows.

"Not trick photography, ma'am," said Mr. Harrison. "These were taken

using a special kind of film based on the heat-seeking photographic films used by satellites—”

“What Mr. Harrison means,” interrupted Peter’s father, “is that this is *our house*, Joan, but seen in a completely different light. Literally! Infra-red light, you see. This is real Department-of-Defence stuff. These red blotches you see here—in fact this whole aura, this kind of pinkish stuff—is *heat*.”

“What I think of, ma’am,” Mr. Harrison interjected modestly, “as *heat loss*.”

Peter’s mother brushed her hair back from her forehead and gazed at the photographs. “I can see it’s a house,” she said. She turned over the photographs one by one. “This is our house?” she said.

“That’s right,” said Peter’s father briskly. “Pretty amazing, eh?”

“When were these taken? Only it makes me feel odd,” she said, staring at Mr. Harrison, “to think of someone going around my house, taking photographs in the dead of night.”

“No cause for alarm,” the visitor chuckled. “Our people are very discreet.”

“You mentioned satellites,” she said, gazing at him.

A touch irritably, Mr. Harrison said, “Satellites are irrelevant, what these pictures show—”

“And what I still don’t know,” Peter’s mother interrupted, looking steadily at Mr. Harrison, “is what exactly you are selling.”

“I can answer that question for you, ma’am,” Mr. Harrison said, wiggling his back as he sat up straight, “and any others you may have. Firstly, I represent the Atlas Home Insulation Company. That means that I sell insulation, ma’am—a full insulation service, with a promise of guaranteed reduction in home heating costs. It’s that simple. Guaranteed. Second, why have I made these photographs for you? Well, to put it bluntly, ma’am, so as to help you visualize the size of the problem you may have got.” With a forefinger he traced the outline of the blue walls in the photograph. “You see, ma’am, all the time heat is escaping from your house—through tiny cracks in the walls that we can’t even see, but more importantly, through the windows and chimneys and doorways. That’s energy, ma’am, pure and simple. And energy is dollars. What you see here,” he indicated the red smudges, “is dollars, ma’am, your husband’s dollars, just floating off into thin air.”

Peter’s father said quickly, shifting upright in his chair, “Ha ha, I don’t think he means to imply that there’s anything *irresponsible* here—”

Peter’s mother cut in sharply: “Well, thank you for that presentation. I’m afraid we’ve wasted your time because flying dollars or not, we aren’t in a position to spend any money right now on this old house. I wouldn’t like you to be under any illusions.”

Mr. Harrison smiled and looked to Peter's father to gainsay this, but he just sighed and shook his head and said, "I'm afraid she's right, as always, Mr. Harrison. The truth is, we are rather strapped for money just now, and this house is a burden in more ways than one."

"Just what do you pay, currently, to heat your home?" Mr. Harrison asked. He took out a notebook and a little silver-coated pencil.

"Well, Joan could answer that," Peter's father said. "But look—let me show *you* something that *you* might be interested in." He stood up. "In fact, it's right up your alley. Come on, bring your drink, it's just outside."

Harrison's mouth hung open for a second, then he smiled and stood.

"Not through the kitchen," Peter's mother said. "I've just washed the floor in there."

"Sure, sure," Peter's father said. He led the way out the front door and around the side of the house to the backyard. The swimming pool, its translucent green and blue plastic walls stained with irregular patches of brown, shone in the bright sunshine; you could see right through the walls into the shifting mass of water. Next to it Peter had set up his tent. The backyard hummed with insects.

"Look up," his father commanded. Mr. Harrison squinted up at the sloping back roof, his mouth hanging open. "You see? That's my system for heating the pool. One hundred and twenty feet of hose, coiled along the back roof, warmed by solar energy. It's perfect. You wouldn't believe how hot that water gets! Seven or eight hours of sun a day, and when it's cloudy or cold, who wants to swim anyway?"

"Ingenious," Mr. Harrison said.

"Isn't it? So you see, we do what we can. You don't need a lot of money to live a good life, just a bit of creativity." He placed a hand fondly on Peter's shoulder.

"I know many people," Mr. Harrison said, dabbing at his brow, "who would be pleased to turn this idea into a commercially viable proposition. All the same, let's not get side-tracked."

"No," Peter's father said, lowering his eyes. "No, of course not." They trudged back into the house and into the living-room. "Look," he said, "thanks for dropping in. I recognize it's not the outcome you wanted, but there it is." They did not sit down. "But these pictures, they're *very* interesting. How did you get into this line of work?"

"Atlas," Mr. Harrison said gruffly, "is a contractor to the government under the energy efficiency bill."

"Is that right," Peter's father said, looking at the mysterious photographs again. "To think that energy efficiency is a political issue these days," he ruminated. "Still, I suppose it has to be, what with all the oil running out."

"Your house, with its exposed position," Mr. Harrison said, "stands to

benefit considerably. Rather than look at the cost, I like to look at the opportunity—”

“So do I, so do I,” Peter’s father said. “Let’s see, why don’t you call round again in a few months’ time.”

“Ah,” said the salesman, “well now that would be impossible, sir. You see, we need to get our work booked in now. It’s no good waiting till the winter months, as you would appreciate—”

“Well, that just about does it, then,” Peter’s father said helplessly. “I’m afraid you’ve dragged yourself up the hill for no good reason, apart from a chat and a refreshing drink. But let me see, let me see....” He turned to Peter. “What do you think of these pictures, son? Pretty neat, aren’t they? Would you like one of them for your room? Show it to your friends? How your house is leaking energy all over the place?” Peter nodded.

“Well, then here’s my proposition,” he said to Mr. Harrison, taking out his wallet, “let me give you a dollar for these photographs, and for your time—”

“That’s quite all right,” Mr. Harrison said. He shook his head irritably. He snapped open his briefcase and stuffed the pictures and some other material—papers, forms—inside. “It’s not actually your house, it’s just an example.” He clipped the briefcase shut and turned to go. “If anything, your house is in a worse state, I should imagine.”

“Well, now,” Peter’s father said. “Hold on there, let me see you out.” But the screen door banged before he could get to it. “Ah well,” he said. “Back to the drawing board, I guess.” Peter’s mother stood accusingly in the door to the kitchen. “Thank you for the fruit juice, Joan,” he said.

“Look here,” she said, “for heaven’s sake, Harold—”

“Well, you know,” he said. “There *was* talk of a government grant for that sort of thing,” he said, “I wonder if our friend knew anything about it.”

“Government grant? That sounds mighty likely. Why are you so eager to please these people? Why not ask him for a job instead of pretending—”

“Oh Joanie, what harm is there?”

“You know, you *could* spend your time in better ways than herding salesmen round the backyard.”

They began to quarrel and Peter pushed through the swing door to the kitchen and out onto the porch and down the rotting back steps to the yard. He leaned against the wall of the pool, bending it in with his knees and watching the water ripple away. He crawled into his tent and took out his planes and lay on his back, zooming the planes around above his face. The air in the tent was warm and smelled of plastic, but Peter could feel the coolness of the earth through his back. His two main planes were a Hawker Harrier and a Spitfire. Both had clear plastic cockpit shields that slid back and wheels that he could let down or fold up into the belly

of the plane. After a few minutes his father joined him in the tent.

"Ah well," he said. "Look, here's your juice."

He lay with his head and chest inside the tent, his legs sticking out. Peter sat up and drank his juice. It was cold and sweet. Afterwards he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then wiped his hand on the bottom of the tent. The tent floor was covered with gritty bits of earth and dry grass and crumbs. If you lay on it for a while, the plastic material left an impression on your palms and cheek and the back of your thighs—a tiny crisscross pattern, barely visible if you looked at the tent itself, but quite clear on your skin.

"Your mother's right," his father sighed. "But still, but still... You see, Peter, what bothers me is that it's not *our* problem any more.... We're fine, I mean your mother and I, our generation, so-called, but what are *you* going to do when the oil runs out? What about *your* kids?" He shifted his shoulders about on the lumpy floor of the tent.

"Well," he said more quietly, "actually I don't know the first thing about it. I've never really thought about it—what will happen next. Maybe I should," he sighed. "Maybe it'll be all right. I'm not naturally a gloomy person, that's the thing." He laughed, an abrupt bark. "All that energy seeping away, makes you think, doesn't it? Some days I could use a bit of insulation myself." He yawned and stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles. "Just *feel* that energy flowing away," he murmured. "This is a great tent. I could go to sleep."

He closed his eyes for a moment and yawned again. Then he sighed and sat up and began to wriggle out of the tent.

"If I ever *do* get gloomy," he said, "I can count on you, can't I? You'll cheer me up. 'Look on the bright side, Dad—family, friends,' isn't that right?" He laughed, reaching back into the tent to ruffle Peter's hair.

Peter took the biscuit from his pocket, broke it in two, and handed one half to his father.

Where Am I?

Nigel Maister

Bittersweet. The homecoming. He. Now. The son. Father. Breast heaving. Cries out. Mist in the valley, lying thick like a quilt under which he, the father, now the son, breast heaving cries out for air. The morning pungent, reeks of dew and blossoms barely open and lichen, like God's spittle, stains the rocks a blue.

Ah. He cries.

The shutters: he closes them, barring the sun, and slots of light on the petalled comforter and the old man's hands with their liver spots and parchment skin and hair like a worn brush.

He goes out over the cold flagstones on naked feet and legs ill-used to the cold, damp, unheated mornings and flagstones on naked feet. The orchard is alight in the burgeoning day and he goes out, slipping into sandals on the concrete *stoep*, to where she waits with the fat child, back to the building sun.

This is how it was, he says, I guess, still is (apologetic, why?).

Once fat with child, now just the fat child blowing bubbles over a shoulder, gums bared, pink and swollen. She talks of the tingling sensation of her milk coming down, like pins and needles, she says. I, he thinks, have made this. Carved this out. Life. Touching his cheek, so smooth, so smooth. Imagining the milk coming down in a stream of fine bubbles like the advertisement he saw for champagne on the TV, only white, inverted, from the tip of her shoulder to the swollen breasts. How, he still cannot understand, except to see the nests of fine red veins like roots seeping milk into the pink soil of her breasts.

I'll take you 'round.

And a weak call from the shuttered house: the old man, crying for air.

And he excuses himself for the third time that morning, removes his sandals on the gray concrete stained with the runoff from potted plants and enters the house with the cold flagstones and dead embers in the hearth and fine ash where the back draft coughed it out over the varnished stones. The old man seems to look up at him as he enters the shuttered room and the white eyes, like poached eggs in the sunken skull, swim in their own juice.

Ah, he says. Ah. Ah.

The head hanging limp from the shrunken sinews of its neck slipped off the pillow. And the boy, he, the father, now the boy bends down on the bed which gives way under his weight according to the physics of history and the metal memory of springs used to another's weight (the mother-wife) long gone. Taking the old man's head within palm and long-boned fingers as one would take some infinitely precious glass orb or cup of water from a stream, he settles it again to rights on its pillow, touching briefly the white parchment hands and their history mapped out in fading blue beneath the skin, as if to say: I'll be back, take care, I'll be back. I'm home.

But he can't leave the room and stands staring at the old man on the dappled sheets, dampened and sweat-stained with infirmity and premonition and senses receding, leaving only the one sense: fear of an end all-too-surely coming. For them both. And the boy, now the father, and he, the father, square off in the umber of the room, his breathing and the other's faint gasps the only vestige of a lasting unspoken acrimony. If only the light were dying, he thinks, and descending dark covering all loss. But no, the day outside breaks only too familiarly and she, outside, with the fat child waiting.

On the grass as he comes out of the house into the morning. Pieta in the dew with the little chap shuffling and rocking on thick creased legs. She looks up at him and smiles with, he sees now, all that once was there.

Let's go, he says.

Locking his hands' vise under the pink arms and hoisting the child to his own breast beating heavily now from some inner turmoil. The child wails, the small wound of its mouth opening in a perfect O of sound and pain and petulance.

We were having such fun here, on the grass, she says. He enjoys it, she says, on the grass.

The child screaming now against his heart. Screaming.

Do we have to go?

Yes, we have to go.

And he regrets immediately his tone with her, knowing the sharpness will draw a later blood. She feels the smart and silently gets up and follows him and the child between the trees through the grass.

The child continues to cry as she comes up behind him. He has stopped without turning, awaiting her approach. They exchange the infant like old, practiced intimacies. Suckling, the fat child quiets.

Mine, he thinks, watching the lips knead the bruised nipple. All mine.

They are standing then in the orchard, the three of them, in the constant throb and static of the insected air, between the trees. No fruit yet, just the thick leaves and miniature crowns of blossoms studding the green

like white bolts. They do not speak for a while until the little one has finished and she has hoisted the strap of her cotton dress once more onto her shoulder in an action so practiced it might seem perfunctory.

Expert, he thinks.

Ah, he hears the old man cry. But only in his mind as if some vestige of conscience had surfaced; some obscure wrong for which no repentance, no obeisance, no penitence, will suffice.

This is/We should.

They speak together—an uneasy choir—and laugh, briefly.

This is all so familiar, he says, I suppose it should be, shouldn't it?

We should make sure this time I get an aisle seat for the return, she says. He's just too much otherwise to handle, she says.

Ah.

The old man.

I think he wants to go back, she says.

But the child says nothing, asleep heavily in her arms.

Come with me a little way further, and he hates the faint shimmer of pleading he hears in his own voice, its pitch raised in supplication.

She looks at him.

Please.

And she follows with the dozing child, through the trees and he recounts to her memory upon memory inlaid like an insubstantial mosaic into the very ground itself. It is as if every moment of this soil contains within it the actuality of a life lived. He leads her through a vale of rock, sand and familiar grasses, disturbing birds, utterly cobalt in this light, which flutter like fans out of the undergrowth. They move between trees as if through halls of columns in some vast temple containing the liturgy of his past. Which he now sings.

This here, he says, is where three trees stood and another, fallen one, across them like a bridge almost, a linking ramp. The Three Sisters, we called them. Without having to climb you could touch, almost, the highest branches. Of course, balance was the trick. And this (now further on, having moved through stacks of pines separating orchard from orchard) was where we'd test our mettle. You'd have to jump off here, he says, leaning a hand against an elevated sandstone ledge, the shelf of an enormous, single boulder. The sand below's soft, here, feel, like powder. It would blister your feet in summer, cushion your fall, and the huge rock itself, being so freestanding, and the whole surrounded by bush, like a fort—a *kraal*—where we, toy soldiers, tested our courage with a leap. Only, he says, it was much higher then. Hard to grasp, really, how much it seems to have shrunk and yes, I know it is I who've grown.

He's not sure if she smiles at this, and anyway she has turned away already, moving towards a next appointment as if their path is

foreordained, which it's not, but just her moving in and of itself says clearly to him: You've told me this/I've seen this all before, which he has/she has not and, in fact, if he would not move after her so quickly to lead her further but would let her move away, complete her action, she would strand herself with the initial impulse spent, and he—her guide—triumphant rescue her.

But, ah, the old man cries, she takes you away to where, to where she is and not to where you *are*. Across seas, far from your roots; a siren wrecking you upon her rock of comfort, wealth, ambition (for what?), and faceless futures on alien soil. She does not care, her indifference and contempt for us is all.

And he has argued with him all their married life 'til now, with him, the father, now the child.

It's this she's taken from you, this (the hand takes in the hearth, horizon, all).

And this, he motions to her as they move through infant trees, is barely planted. The old man put these trees in just before the stroke. It takes a few years—they look so spindly now—growth takes...

And here she cuts him off: D'you think he'll let me phone?

Of course. You know it's not, and never has been, a question of permission. And now, either way, the point is moot. You see the state he's in.

He looks at her; her fingers—those white white nails—laced in the child's fine strands. He, awake now, dark eyes blinking, blowing bubbles, fist tucked close against the chin. Drool.

I just thought I'd ask. I'd like to get back and phone. And anyway, he's catching too much sun.

There's more I'd like...

I know. The sun. She points. I should call, you know. They say always to reconfirm seventy-two hours in advance.

It is, indeed, now hot: a pallid heat picking at the bones of the morning, blanching the sky. He takes from out of his pocket the child's soft hat, its crushed cotton printed with wildflowers, and snugly pulls it down over the head with wide eyes watering against the light.

As if to linger, he leads them back on other paths, a longer route through groves of olives, other orchards, past the dam and down a pitted gravel road towards the house. He curbs himself from commenting or creating any links between the landscape and himself, sensing her haste as she shifts the child from shoulder to shoulder, trailing a link of spittle caught crystalline in the light between shoulder and chin.

They pass the labourers' cottages, white and plain and unadorned by trellises to harbour snakes and birds which pick the fruit. The tendrils of smoke from open fires and smell of morning meats and refuse stinking

sweetly in the bins and smoldering in open pits. Perhaps he will return here later in the day, with the sun downing, to greet again the mob: the men and children naked to the waist, the women in their aprons vigilant behind their knives, slicing, de-husking, de-boning, pitting and silent. To reassert his place amongst them as their boyhood friend, but master, *jongbaas, kleinbaas, wanneer-kom-u-huistoe-baas*.

They reach the house, shielded from winds by pines and gums and oaks, the stretch of lawn a moat to be traversed or waded through now that the grass is long, uncut, unkempt, harbouring God-knows-what, he thinks. They stand facing each other like twin sentinels guarding unspoken ports of mistrust and fear.

Will you take him?

And again the exchange of flesh which yields to his arms a weight that seems disproportionate to its months. The fat child whimpers, slobbers, but restrains a cry. Its fingers, like small slugs, grasp and release, grasp and release, grasp and release. He notices the perfect nails with their white moons and thinks: All mine. Mine.

He explains to her the workings of the phone: the switch that must be thrown, the handle that must be turned, the complex patterns of request that must be made, the archaic formalities necessary to connect them with the world at large which runs at greater speed.

Shall I come in with you?

Watch him.

Try to be quiet, he says, but this is lost to her as she is moving swiftly away towards the shuttered house.

They're not staying here at her request (the kid, the cold, the heat) but in the town's hotel, its brown carpeting and puce walls, its ladies' bar with wagon-wheel chandeliers and smell of smoke, the kitchen seemingly at war with the clash of stainless steel, cutlery and cheap crockery falling onto tile too frequently, he thinks. The proprietor is fat and sweaty, prone to gin and too much paint that can't conceal the shadow above her lip. The water's hot, she said, the room faced east, the sheets are changed once weekly, tea or coffee before 7:30 or later at your leisure (but there's a charge), no pets allowed, the little one is too too too sweet for words, I want to eat him up, the spiders on the wall are large (don't be alarmed) but harmless, help to control the flies which are a pest believe you me, enjoy your stay, we close the doors at nine, the night bell's there, please wipe your feet, your passports are in the safe.

Hearty, hearty, hearty, is the Lord of Hosts, he'd joked as they'd ascended (the lift was down).

I hate it here, she'd said that evening, but by then there was no place to go, except.... And here she balked. She would not say why (beyond

the kid, the cold, the heat), but he knew the taste of death could not mingle with her, the child, and milk coming down.

Instead, they'd made love on sheets the texture of coarse muslin, with the child asleep beside them in a crib of chipped white bars (provided by the management at no extra charge). And it was good. And brief. And smelled of other deaths more difficult to hide. And they slept.

He's cross-legged on the lawn now with the child standing before him, held erect by his open arms, like some diminutive dancing partner. He feels a power and a tenderness in this distinct and formal embrace, knowing that to release his grasp would topple the fat form backwards like a skittle. He contemplates this moment of balance. And he, the son, now the father, lets go and watches as the child shudders on its pins, totters and collapses in a heap. And laughs. Both of them, the child too, though silently. It is a game on grass repeated until the laugh contorts into a fear and tears begin to well and he picks up the pile of flesh and bones, holds him to his breast and rocks away the pain. And so they sit without the house that's blinded to the sun, watching a trail of ants thread its way between the blades and disappear into a perfectly round fissure in the earth.

She's watching them, he knows, but does not turn. Just sits and rocks the soft child slung like a sack against his shoulder. And she is watching them from the *stoep*, waiting for the line to clear. He will not turn, but takes pleasure in her silent observation, her attention, warming now as the day warms: solidly, steadily, securely.

They've carved a trail, the ants, a barren path that snakes across the lawn, unbroken, hammered clear by constant movement and tiny feet. Like red pearls they string themselves along this road in constant single file, carrying in their mouths and pincers enormous chips of leaves like fins and rudders steering them homewards. Holewards. He read somewhere that inside the nest the heat's intense (or is that termites?), a womb-inferno incubating the swollen queen discharging eggs into the red earth, tended by her men.

He shows the child who's flushed but silent now. He places a finger across the path causing a moment's pandemonium in the thrilling line; a rupture of the steady flow that sends the ants scattering to regain the scent of their trajectory. One climbs onto his finger, which he hoists aloft before his wide-eyed son, turning his palm, now upwards, now inverse, so that the scuttling insect remains in view. The child seems to delight in this darting speck, a shard of leaf five times its size (at least), a wonder, clutched primly in its pincer jaws and extends a clammy swollen hand towards the tiny prey, but withdraws it gurgling, gums aglow, wedging the pink fist into his mouth.

He sits the child down on the grass, sure of her approving gaze on father, son where she stands waiting for the line to clear upon the *stoep*.

He leaves the child on all fours in the thick grass to marvel at the ants and traces their trail across the lawn, up around a boulder, on towards the base of a loose-leafed tree, the beaded line of insects threading up the trunk towards the bare-stripped branches shorn, denuded, spike-like at the top. In this too, he thinks, there lies another death, one more cruel than the wasted man entombed within the shuttered silent house, gasping for air. A constant tearing at the fibers of this life, an inexorable, passive, prolonged death: the tree inert, incapable of even the meanest resistance to the marauding horde's assault.

It is perhaps this that makes him turn—or thoughts of ancient tortures: captives tied to earth and left for these minute rapacious living knives to pick the flesh from bones and skull and sockets wet with flesh. But turn he does towards the child.

It's not apparent on that first glance back that all's not right. It takes a moment for the nameless surge of panic to infuse itself into his veins. Perhaps it is his own cry issuing like a lance from out his breast that makes him turn.

The child is there, not crouching now, but shuddering convulsively upon its back and from the plump mound beneath the thumb, held up now to the sky, he sees the thin ribbon of snake dangling, fangs spiked into the flesh, wound round the arm like the *tefillin* the old man bound each morning to the forearm lying wasted now upon the dappled sheets. Like a thin belt, the tail thrashes.

By the time he's reached the child, the snake is moving off, slithering through the long grass quickly, immune to the pebbles and stones he's hurled its way, the shivering child crying at his feet. And she is running too; her cries precede her across the grass.

It's as if the venom's seeped into his veins. He stands immobile. The child cries. He stands. She screams. He thinks, Where am I? Where am I now? Where am I?

My baby, oh, my baby, my baby, my baby, my baby. A mantra she intones, the flushed child shivering in her arms growing cold.

He gets the car. They drive. The roads are dust. The sun is high. The day is hot.

Faster. Can't you go any faster?

Knuckles white against the wheel, palms perspiring.

The clinic's far, understaffed and ill-prepared.

He parks the car, though she's already fumbled, panicked, swearing, with the lock, the handle, cradling the infant, running up the stairs and through the doors.

The dour nurse on duty takes his name, the details. The only doctor's

playing golf; they'll send a boy to fetch him off the links.

He sits and waits.

She walks towards him, empty-armed now. He notices her feet are bare. She sits beside him on the bench.

They sit beside each other.

He feels her tears and puts an arm around her, but her body—rigid, unyielding—says no.

They wait.

She rises to request a tissue from the nurse who rummages through drawers of desks and clanging file cabinets before a box is found.

She shudders now from shock beside him, but resists his arms, whatever meagre comfort he could provide. The nurse brings a blanket, threadbare, patterned, smelling of disinfectant and old bones. And regulation slippers, soft like paper to the touch.

They wait.

Her sobs subside.

They sit. Side by side.

Where are you, she says. Where are you? But he fails to understand the tense.

The doctor comes: jovial, pink, smiling, blades of grass stuck to his shoes, two-toned with spikes, burrs clinging to his socks. Trouble in the rough, he says. What have we here? The nurse rises from behind her desk, takes him aside and they confer.

Ah, he says. Ah.

She rises from the bench and moves towards the two bent, conferring heads. He, the father, now the child, follows a step behind.

You must excuse me, take a seat, Wilmien will bring you tea, *'n goeie koppie tee*.

He's gone towards the wards already and they retreat back to the bench. Powerless. Stripped bare.

How do you like it? Milk or sugar? Both?

Thank you.

It's no answer, but for now it will suffice.

The tea arrives and sits untouched upon the tray perched on a pile of magazines selling cars, buxom women and feed for cattle.

Across the room, a picture hangs askew. The walls are white. An ashtray empty, save for a single withered butt. A birdcage, covered by a stained tea towel, hides its bars. The dour nurse sits painting her nails, stroke by stroke, meticulously, the air perfumed with the dry smell of chemical gloss.

The doctor, now in white coat, emerges from a door at the passageway's end and moves towards them. They stand, like defendants in a court or truant kids before the Head. But he turns before he reaches the ante-

room in which they wait and disappears behind another door which closes with a click. They sit, and when the doctor re-emerges, do not stand but wait, heads bowed.

I will be frank with you. It's bad. The venom's potent, even for a full grown man. Paralysis sets in, the organs fail and such. Such cases, you won't believe me I'm sure with bush and farmland all about, are relatively rare. This is a clinic. Not a hospital. A *clinic*. Our problem is the nearest serum's miles away. We don't keep it here, its shelf life's short, you understand. I've called. In exceptional cases they have been known to fly some in. But today is Sunday. The heat's intense. The boys are on manoeuvres in the bush. In short, they can't. Cutbacks, and the like. They will send some by road. Tomorrow lunch time, with God's grace, it will be here.

Could we....

We could drive, ourselves. He speaks on cue, for both. We might be able....

You could, I know. The doctor, calm voice gentle, poisoned with is pity, comfort and distance they do not wish to hear. I do not think you'll be back the sooner, he says.

Even if driving through the night?

Even through the night.

I don't accept... She stammers. I don't. No. No.

And furthermore (he slips a hand into the pocket of his coat like a card into a file; the other rests against her shoulder, hunched now, sheltering a high whimper within its curve, chin bent to her chest), they won't release the stuff to a civilian, not even with a letter. Clearly I can't accompany you, I'm needed here. At hand. And so, it would be best, are you.

She bolts. Alone. Out through the doors and down the steps to the gravel lot, the car, and sounds of day.

I understand, the doctor says. I do. But all's not lost. There still is hope. Remember. You would not want to be away if a turn is taken for the worse.

Excuse me, he says, polite without reason, and follows her, seared and heartsore, out into the light.

They circle round the car like animals, she now at the driver's door standing, he at hers, unlocking it, then moving back to his and she to hers. They stand across from each other, the car, a wall, between them, roof and bonnet boiling to the touch. He waits for her to climb inside, but she sinks to the gravel heavily, not faint, and kneels there in the car's brief shade, head leaning low against the door.

He squats beside her.

Come, he says. Come.

Forehead pressed against the painted metal. Eyes open. Still.

He notices a jagged edge, a tear of rust where the door frame, corroded, meets the chassis.

Come, he says.

No.

She stands and moves towards the clinic's steps, climbing with weary reverence as if the stuccoed, faceless building were an altar or a shrine. He sees her at the summit before the doors briefly brush her skirt, displacing dust.

Inside, the doctor stands thumbing through a chart, knowing their return.

May I see him?

Of course.

They move along the corridor, following the coat and golf spikes clipping the linoleum like breaking frost.

The child lies naked in a high cot, torso bared, nipples pink, a wire protruding from a suction cap between the breast. Its skin is ashen, faintly blue. The arm is swollen grossly, the colour of a plum. A drip is wedged into a tiny vein. There are other tubes extending from the nose and mouth as if it were no more a child, but rather a slack pink bellows fueling some machine. There is movement in the breast. It breathes. Its eyes are shut. It breathes.

I would like...I would like...could I...I would like to stay the night. Here.

The doctor hesitates.

I understand, he says. We're really not equipped. I'll have them make you up a bed. There is no food here, I'm afraid, and you should eat.

They walk into the town. The day is done, the sun crouched waiting to slip behind the ridge of mountains backed up to the west. The air is dry and smells of dust and birds.

He orders steak and eggs. She asks for water in a glass. They do not speak.

I think, he says, I must spend the night up there. With him, the old man. I cannot leave him all alone.

Yes, she says.

He leaves her at the clinic's stairs. He kisses her upon the neck. She smells of sweat. The car starts quickly. The roads are dust.

He opens the shutters now, and outside the sky is white and clean as satin. The old man stirs and his small tongue wets his white-scummed lips with a slow caress. He makes a fire, carrying coal and logs from the storehouse, life still crawling beneath the bark. He sits with the man, the father, in the blue room listening to the birds and kindling crackle. Later, when dark has settled, he boils sweet potatoes, pumpkin and peas on the

old stove, mashes them together into a thick paste and ladles in some gravy, dark and thick and salty from the iron pot warming on the gas. And he, the father, now the son, sits beside the old man on the sheets and with a teaspoon in one hand and the other firmly stretched behind the old man's back—a brace to lift and to support—he brings the paste from bowl to lips and wipes the excess from the chin and sheets. He lays them all to rest: the bowl, the teaspoon, he, the father, and sits a while in the cooling room with the wind awash through the trees and the stars emerging in the black sky.

He talks. The old man breathes. But he speaks now, a flood of incidents, remembrances pour forth. Old wounds and new ones barely healed, confidences, confessions, recriminations, questions, accusations, all flow now in a stream through the dulled air, bathing man and man in a thick coat of words and tears. It is a dialogue, though the one does little but breathe in gasps and brittle exhalations. And a heart is emptied here upon the blazing hearth with the wind outside and the stars blinking in their nocturnal sockets until the flood abates and the mind behind them beaches itself on the rocky shores of sleep. Later, he wakes in the night with the fire dead and the old man's rattling snores, closes the shutters and walks out over the flagstones into the cool air.

The night is alive with sounds and beyond the trees the glow of fires from the labourers' cottages and occasional howls of dogs and laughter can be heard and glimpsed. With flashlight in hand he moves across the grass and searches for the trail of ants, but that lies abandoned now, left exposed to the soft embrace of morning dew.

He moves inside and strips, lies naked down upon the bed beside the old man and, for the first time ever, offers up an awkward prayer to God. To life. To death. And sleep.

The child is dead by daybreak. In time to catch the plane. By the time he's reached the clinic she's sedated, hunched upon the bench, rocking in the arms of the dour nurse to and fro and to and fro. The doctor's tending knife wounds, syphilis, ruptured lungs and broken bones: the spoils of weekend sport and war.

I'm sorry. Truly sorry. We tried our best, he says between the bouts.

She leans against him heavily, sobbing, weak with fear and grief. He shoulders her emptiness and guides her to the car. His numbness is all. She sleeps through the afternoon and evening on sheets the texture of coarse muslin and wakes towards midnight, hollow-eyed and frail.

I'm leaving. Tomorrow. Early. They've made arrangements to send him after me. There were papers. I signed. Her words are measured. I know you must stay. Should. Must. Whatever.

I'll drive you down.

No, she says. No. No. Please, no. I'll catch the bus.

She packs.

They do not sleep. Or talk. And in the morning she is gone.

Alone in the orchard now, watching the early dusk and labourers returning to their homes cradling baskets, scythes and other implements which look to him too crude to serve a purpose now that the millennium is drawing close. A tractor rumbles farther off and even farther the borehole pump pants and sighs and gasps. The men are dark, talking in darker tongues. Their overalls hang loose upon their frames. They greet him with a quiet reverence and a quieter disdain he all too keenly feels. He searches for a familiar face: a boyhood friend, a mate. But age or work or time has robbed them, robbed him of any shade of recognizance. Or perhaps there is none; perhaps all he knew here have dispersed, are dead perhaps, or simply have taken other paths towards their rest. He wonders how he looks to them.

From where he stands he can survey the land, the orchards, hills, the trees and homestead nestling close, shoring up a bulwark easily breached by rain, by wind, by light and dark and smoke. There are perhaps generations of his kind interred within the soil, lineages wrought, begot and fashioned from blood or conquest or both. Those whose hands have reached into this soil to pluck a weed or wrench an errant root or plant a sapling crying all the while: Mine, this. All mine. He sees his child now cold against the slab, hears the old man gasping air, the woman, stranger, lover, mother, father, son and holy ghosts. He turns.

He takes the long road back through groves of olives, other orchards, past the dam and down a pitted gravel road towards the house. The fires outside the labourers' cottages smolder, sizzle: meat on the braziers, fat spitting into coals. He moves down close to one between the men who part their ranks and nod, the women staring down towards their feet, telling children: Hush. And on the coals before him roasting on the fire a tortoise turned upon its back, its shell now blackened, steaming, soon to crack. The legs outstretched paw aimlessly at air, the sinewed neck stretched taut against the heat, the eyes ablaze and huge, inflamed like blisters.

He hears the men laugh hoarsely, briefly, amongst themselves. The children giggle, the women, silent, sharpen knives.

He says: Where am I now? Where am I? But this time out, aloud.

Citrusdal, South Africa, 1996.

Babcza

Cinda Gault

I sit in Matthew's darkened room, rocking, listening to my child sleep while I peer out over Babcza's garden. If I give my ancient neighbour any encouragement, she'll creep like a vine through our fence. Her friendly chit-chat would be tolerable if restricted to discussions about weather in the few minutes it takes to haul groceries from the car. But she wouldn't stop there. She'd follow me into the house, regale me with her problems and fears, overwhelm me with her need. She is a community I do not want, a dependence that awaits and oppresses me, like death. That hopeful, wrinkled smile hides a storm of demand.

Her face has war-time Poland stamped onto it. She is seventy-eight, which would put her in her twenties during the war. Mothers had babies in those conditions. I can't think about it. My father always said the war years were the best because everyone pulled together. He was too young to go to war, and his father was too old, so it strikes me as a ridiculous thing to say.

* * *

I am standing on the top step of our front porch several months after my baby's death. I am facing my father, and he is scowling at me disapprovingly. No, I would have interpreted it as disapproving thirty years ago, when I was five and he still had his hair, waistline, and confidence. He has minded Matt for a grand total of five minutes, long enough for me to run down to the store for milk, and already he is outraged.

"He ran over to your neighbour's house when I told him not to."

I can see Matt's legs sticking out of Babcza's porch. No doubt she is feeding him the little Fruitella candies he begs for.

"Matt," I call.

I hear his muffled acknowledgment.

"You come back in one minute, all right?"

"All right."

"That's right," my father huffs. "Contradict me. I told him he couldn't go over."

"He said he'd be back in a minute. What's a minute?"

"He needs a spanking, not this psychology shit."

I see his emotional scars as though they are marks drawn on Gerry Cheevers's goalie mask. I see his fear and remember his stories of his mother's sequined gown the night she went with his father to the golf club dance. Hours later, while he and his sister trembled in the closet, sequins skittered helplessly from one end of the house to the other. Once big enough, he defended her, landed his father with the punch he'd dreamed of for a decade. It was his mother who turned on him, forbade him to interfere ever again. Now he stands at the sidelines, criticizing instead of helping. I see my father's little-boy face searching mine for the little girl who adored him. We are both gone, and he doesn't know it.

Who says everyone pulls together in a war?

"What's the matter with you?" he is saying. "Your mother had two miscarriages."

"This was more than a miscarriage, Dad."

He doesn't recognize my need, and so I sound merely petulant. What do I want him to do? Nothing; there is nothing anyone can do. Then why won't I let him off the hook so things can go back to the way they were before? My need distracts him from recognizing that all he must do is acknowledge my pain.

"Matt's in crisis right now, Dad. We're all in crisis. It takes as long as it takes. This isn't the time to be hard on him."

"You should spank him. He's a little brat."

I look at him squarely, know exactly what I am doing. "Stick your advice, Dad. I don't need to justify myself to you."

I have hurt him. He will recoil, not speak about it, eventually forget about it, one day forget everyone's name who visits him and finally forget who we are. Like his mother has done. He turns back down the walk and strides toward his car. I watch his receding bald spot and notice how baggy the seat of his pants has become. He will cry all the way home, yet I can't help him. To release him would implicate me; I would be saying it's all right for us to pretend things are fine, the same as ever. It is what he and my mother did, what he and his mother did. I will not let him make me into a distant war that does not affect him.

Matt saunters up the path, a candy in each hand.

"Why Granddad going?"

"He's mad at me, honey."

"Why?"

I hesitate for a moment and consider protecting him, like perhaps a mother should. "He thinks I should spank you."

Confusion darkens his baby face, and I spend the next half hour explaining to him something he can't possibly understand.

* * *

Babcza watched me fling weed killer over both my front and back lawns,

crystal bombs deployed by a demented Johnny Appleseed. Had she belonged to our wave of trendy professionals invading the neighbourhood, she would have given me facts on the damage I was causing the environment. But she had come with Polish immigrants two generations before, and so was more appalled by money wasted on anything that wasn't absolutely necessary. She felt it helpful to tell me that she just pulled the weeds out.

I'd studied the stereotype: flowered cotton shift over a frame the shape of a concrete block. She was invariably bent over—knees apart, bum out—to expose knee-high support hose. Bob found me watching her one day, and I made him promise that we'd put the house up for sale if he ever found me bent over weeds in a flowered shift. All spring, she'd carried out sprouted plants in margarine and yogurt containers, then spooned out goopy-looking fertilizer over the garden. Her magic concoction made her backyard erupt into a paradise; my potent chemicals purged what I could not cope with.

Three weeks later, I stood alone in my back yard surveying the decimation. Blankets of shrivelled brown were torn here and there by tufts of green, pathetically hopeful signs of where my bombs of poison had missed. I glanced over Babca's low wall of tomato plants at her burgeoning cherry tree, peach tree, and purple phlox that had arisen sphinx-like from the ruins of faded tulips and daffodils. I didn't notice her until she dropped anchor in front of the low-hanging grape vine near her back step. A battleship moored in silence, bearing witness to the moon surface under my feet.

"It didn't work." I needed to explain.

"Work too good," she said, smiling. I rubbed my hand across my belly, a protective habit left over from pregnancy.

"You starting another baby yet?"

Instinctively, I recoiled and took a step toward the deck stairs for refuge. "No, I don't think we will."

"Another baby make it a little better. You have one nice, healthy boy. He need company. What you called your baby? He was a boy, too?"

Her questions seemed cruel. I stared back over my shoulder at the ruined clover. "We hadn't named him yet."

"You try again. Next you try a girl."

There was no point in trying even an ineffectual smile, since my face knew no compromise now between impassivity and contortion. Perhaps my lack of response hurt her, but if I took the slightest bit of responsibility for her, she would sink me.

The afternoon of our annual garden party marked the third straight day of rain, and I noticed that deepening rivulets were forming a network of fiords in the back yard. We had no overhanging trees or grape plants

for protection, so I set up the barbecue on the deck where I at least would be close to the door. Just like me, our guests said, to persevere and barbecue with an umbrella. I nodded to them from time to time as they appeared at the kitchen window with sympathetic grimaces. Every so often one of them opened the door and congratulated me on the lawn. Their gentle humour felt as distancing as my father's criticism, but I quipped back bravely. They would brace themselves to face me and then make concerned phone calls to Bob afterwards, wondering when I might snap out of this, put it behind me. Out here on the deck, I could give myself over to the discomfort of barbecue smoke and unstoppable rain.

"You need bigger umbrella," called a familiar voice. Babca stood with her hands behind her back, the admiral on deck. She surveyed my watery battlefield through a curtain of streaming water that overflowed her eavestrough. It was the first time I'd noticed a blemish in her Eden.

"I sure need something." I winced at the sound of my plaintive voice, and realized the picture I made: an idiotic Torontonion dressed in self-contained black, topped with a vest of neon giraffes, and bent on flouting the elements for the sake of a barbecue.

"A grape plant be good," she said. "Make a roof. I grow one for you for spring time."

I nodded my thanks over the sizzling ribs. No matter how much I pushed them around the grill, they only hissed and grew more decidedly charred. My glance over at her interrupted a thoughtful gaze. It occurred to me suddenly that I might be the subject of her private reveries as she tried to figure out what she could say to me.

"You still sad for baby," she declared.

Accidentally, I dropped the lid of the barbecue, and it slammed shut. I wavered there, caught between a sob and an apology.

"Yes, I'm still sad."

"Rain make me think of my children. They all grown up now and give me nine grandchildren. Three children, I have, two boys and one girl. Once I have two boys and two girls."

It took a moment for what she said to sink in, like water rising slowly in a flooding basement. "What happened?"

"She die. Cancer. Take a long time, but she die."

"How old was she?"

"Ten year old."

I slumped back against the railing.

"I am never the same since," she said with slow thoughtfulness. "Nothing you can do. You lose your child, and you never the same again."

I couldn't allow myself to believe it. How could anyone live with this? Each morning you would wake up, unaware at first that your life was any different than it was when you used to get out of bed without thinking.

And then the breathtaking thud that sank you back into a fog, that psychological screen that you pulled across the stage of your consciousness to prevent a direct hit. This wasn't fair to Matt. It had to ease.

I left the charred meat and slipped into the kitchen, embarrassed by my instability. "I have to go upstairs," I said to Bob. He glanced out at the abandoned barbecue. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's burnt."

Upstairs, I could hear the undeterred buzz of conversation, and its remoteness helped. I heard the doorbell ring, smelled the wafting aroma of pizza. Bob had survived without me. I cried when he brought me a slice and a glass of wine.

* * *

His name was David long before he was born. I had him pictured as a mischievous toddler, a climber for sure considering the level of activity in utero. He'd be small and skinny, with a booming voice, and prone to making rebellious physical statements. I'd natter at him to be careful, then pull him into high flying leaps as we skipped down the sidewalk. No matter how careful you are, you die.

He had an enlarged liver and spleen, and in fifteen hours he was dead. Bob took care of the funeral. He said he had to hold him. Funeral homes give away infant caskets that look like gaudy cake boxes. I stood at the far corner of the cemetery because I couldn't go closer. Bob made special arrangements with the funeral director to shovel the dirt in. He said he needed to tuck David in himself.

* * *

After the garden party, Babcza and I kept track of each other like animals, aware of each other's activity without actually coming face to face. Once I noticed that the leaves had been raked off our lawn, and later, after a heavy snowfall, I returned the favour by shovelling her walk. After midnight one night when I couldn't sleep, I pulled up my blind in time to see an ambulance sail up to dock in front of her house. There was no siren, only the beam of crimson light touching all the houses, over and over again, a pointing finger. When they brought Babcza out on a stretcher, a paramedic ran alongside her with an intravenous bag over his head. I gripped the window frame to stop myself from running down to the street and climbing into the ambulance with her.

The next day I called the hospital, but she had been sent home. I dispatched Bob and Matt with flowers and sweets. Since it was her third heart attack, her grown children already had a schedule devised so that one of them stayed with her each day until she felt better. I pictured her squinted face, her big, awkward hands—maps of dry cracks lined with black earth—folded in her lap like useless tools until a job infused them

with significance. When she asked why I hadn't come along, Bob told her I had to cook for our dinner guests, which wasn't quite true unless you count cooking for the three of us a dinner party. I sat in the rocking chair again that night, noticing that the snow had thickened to a fog, and thinking that I would shovel her walk later.

* * *

It was spring before I looked out the kitchen window to see Babcza sawing off a branch of her peach tree. I took my tea out to the deck and sat on the step to watch.

"Tree no good," she called over when she noticed me. She looked pale, her movements slower, but she still had a way of pressing on with the determination of a tank.

"I thought it looked healthy," I returned.

"Squirrels come. They take fruit and knock it to ground. More squirrels come. No good."

I got up and moved closer across my mottled grass.

"Grass looking good." Babcza nodded at my back yard. "Flowers nice too."

I'd been out early every morning for the past week planting red, pre-sprouted impatiens in a border around the grass. I planted boxes and boxes, so that the back yard brimmed with colour despite the still ailing lawn. While planting them, it had occurred to me that this vibrant red I imported was a cheat, since I couldn't have raised them from seeds if I had tried. I couldn't tell yet if this was too harsh an assessment. Babcza pulled up her saw and set it against the next branch.

"Should you be doing that?" I called. "With your heart, I mean. Let me help."

Her expression shimmered like water reflecting shades of surprise, then resistance, then curiosity. She shrugged again as I opened the gate and stepped carefully around her garden. I took the saw from her and stepped up on the chair she had set beside the trunk. Metal teeth dug into the tree flesh, splaying the branch apart, its green, transparent sap bleeding as I pushed and pulled, sticking then starting again laboriously. Babcza pulled on the branch to help make room for my blade. When the tree finally released its hold on the branch, my blade sliced through it, and Babcza dragged it out to the front of the house.

My hair curled tighter from the exertion, and sweat ran down between my breasts. I would have to let her know somehow that despite the fact that she haunted me, this didn't change anything; I wasn't going to turn into her therapist or social worker or priest. We were still separated by a fence, two generations, a culture and language, and probably a million other things I didn't even know about.

We hacked at the tree, prepared to cut it down because the fruit could

not be protected. We were stalked by something with an imperative to become visible, something that insisted on a grand gesture. It would be our connection.

We worked for an hour before Bob and Matt appeared on our deck searching for me.

“What you doing, Mommy?”

“Helping Babcza, honey.”

“Why Babcza cutting tree?”

“No good,” Babcza offered as she rifled the pockets of her flowered shift for Fruitellas. Matt had already climbed onto his foothold in the fence.

“Why no good?”

I stopped sawing to look at his smooth, translucent face. “Because the squirrels keep taking the fruit and knocking it to the ground. Because the baby died.” Bob looked at me quizzically. I glanced at Babcza, her face grim with concentration as she studied the tree. With the branches gone, the tree looked like a gnarled flagpole. Once I’d finished sawing it off, Babcza pointed to a thick, waist-level plant.

“Look, I have grape plant for you.” She handed me a shovel, and I began to dig out roots that left a huge crater in her garden. She followed as Bob helped me carry the hulking knot of loam back through her gate, then waited as I dug a corresponding hole in my garden. Once she was satisfied that the hole was big enough, we struggled to set the plant into its new home. She drenched it with the garden hose and refrained from mentioning the clumps of clover sprouting at her feet. I planned to steer the sprawling vines up over a trellis I would build over our deck. Dense grape leaves might shelter us from sun and rain, and in late summer ripe fruit could fall through the loosely-woven wooden slats.

* * *

I am crouched in Babcza’s garden with a pair of gardening shears. It is late August and Babcza is in hospital again. Last week, when she gave me the rest of the tomatoes and cucumbers from her garden, she told me she wouldn’t last another winter. No one is home. Her children don’t need to be here when she’s away, but I still want to be careful not to be seen. Babcza’s flowered shift brigade keeps a collective eye on her property.

It is twilight, so I can barely read the gardening book I have open before me. I have been flipping through it, studying pictures to identify the plants. I knew about the phlox, purple and fragrant after a day of sun. The shears clip loudly as I take each flower and lay it carefully in a pile on the darkening grass. My work takes me around the perimeter of both back and front yards, which makes me nervous when I’m out front and

crouched behind the low hedge.

I return to the back yard, and it is suddenly much cooler; shadows have chased the green from emerald into deep forest. The stump of the peach tree seems insignificant now, an old war wound, a forgotten site of trouble and pain. The dahlias are impossibly huge and red, like paper flowers, as though they must have come from a wild tropic. They are from Mexico, I learn, squinting under the hazy shine of the streetlight from our shared back lane way. They were transplanted to Britain in 1789 and now they grow in our back yards. I lay them down beside the phlox and tie their stems together with string.

I grope in the dark for the roses. Their delicate scent guides me, although I already know where the caches of rosebushes are because I watched Babcza plant them only last summer. I nestle them into my pile carefully so their thorns can't reach me when I pick up my offering and walk out front to the sidewalk and down the street.

Babcza's wrinkled face is pale against the unrelenting white of her hospital pillow. She is asleep, or unconscious for all I know. The nurses presume I am her daughter and help me to find vases. If Babcza opened her eyes just now, with the fluorescent lights shining eerily on her flowers—so fresh they hardly know they're cut—she would think we were in a greenhouse.

It is likely that the total time we have spent together is no longer than fifteen hours. It seems outrageous that so short a time could manage so great an effect. Her face has the papery look of old skin, but I sense that if I reached out my fingers and closed my eyes, it would feel like touching an infant. Soft, vulnerable, too much mine. The sprawling bruise on the back of her hand, home to the intravenous needle, reminds me of the unavoidable bruises on a preschooler's shins. Unavoidable pain. I pick up her hand and pay attention to its roughness. Her fore and index fingers look as though they have been worn to bleeding by scrubbing, perhaps laundry done by hand because there wasn't a load big enough to justify a washing machine.

I lean forward, about to leave my place beside her bed, but am stopped by a fierce, determined pressure on my hand. Her eyes never open, but she knows I am here. Perhaps it is my projection, but I feel sure that she knows I am meeting her, however briefly, to allow a mark to be left.

Those Who Trespass

Alissa York

It was the size of an apple. That's what the doctor told me, so that's how I saw it in my head: a dark Red Delicious, all shiny and perfect, cut out of my guts.

You think you'd know it if something was swelling up that big where it didn't belong, but somehow I never felt a thing. Not until that cyst was good and ripe. It was the same day my dad dropped the bomb. Stared down at his boots and mumbled how we were moving out, just him and me, and Maureen wasn't coming along.

It's been building a long time, Robin, was how he explained it. Maureen was in the armchair, with mascara branching out in her crow's-feet and the rosary balled up in her fist. You don't have to go, Robin, she told me, you know you can stay here with me. But I couldn't take the hand she held out. I kept close by my dad, the two of us standing and Maureen down there in her chair.

It happened later on in Biology. I folded up like a jackknife and fell off my stool. It was just like somebody shot me in the guts—not with a bullet exactly—more like with some kind of arrow.

They couldn't get the cyst out clean, so they kept me hooked up to the drip for a week, until everything stunk like antibiotics—my skin and my breath and my shit. The cut was held shut with black stitches and some kind of tape. I kept pushing the blanket down to see, and one time, after the nurse told me not to, I touched it. It didn't hurt. I ran my finger along the scar, kind of stroking it. Then all of a sudden I had to stop. Something came up from inside and pushed my hand away.

The Demerol turned everything slow and dark. My dad came to visit a couple of times, but he was mostly a shadow by the side of the bed, a red and black work shirt with a sawdusty cigarette smell. Maureen never showed, but I figured he didn't tell her, the way things were going the last time I saw them together. I was out in the truck, waiting for him to drive me to school. When he finally came out she was hot on his tail. She grabbed hold of the porch rail with both hands and screamed at the back of his head, You know it, John, you're the weakest sonofabitch that's ever been.

The day they let me go home, my dad was an hour late picking me up. I sat there in the lobby, ten pounds skinnier than the day they brought me in, feeling like a good gust of wind could pin me to the wall. For the first time ever I thought about dying. I could see it clear as anything: that even if I was only fourteen, there'd come a day when I'd up and croak.

When he finally showed up, he reeked of beer. In the truck he told me how he'd found us a new house and moved our stuff in. Then out of the blue he started saying how Roberta couldn't wait to meet me. You remember, I told you about Roberta in the hospital. You remember.

She was there when we got there. The first thing she did was reach into the fridge and pull out two beers and hand one to my dad. It didn't take a genius to see it was her house he'd found.

There were cases of empties towered up in the kitchen and all down the back stairs to the yard. It would've been simple as anything for me to steal a few beers, or even a case, but I didn't feel much like drinking somehow. All I wanted was sleep, but the two of them got pissed and noisy every night, waking me up so I could hear them in the shower together, her squealing, you dirty bastard I'll fix your wagon, and him laughing loud and crazy in a way I'd never heard—thinking the water was drowning it all out I guess.

One night I woke up with my heart going crazy. Roberta was right outside my door. I could hear her out there, taking slow raspy drags and letting the smoke out in these long kind of sighs. Hey, she said after a minute or so, we gotta keep it down. She was just like some drunk in a movie, trying to whisper but not getting it right. Gotta keep it down...the kid needs her sleep. She could've been talking to my dad I guess, but nobody answered her back. I lay awake after that. I shut my eyes, but all I could see was her standing out there, her yellow permed hair and her big sagging butt and her loud lonely voice in the dark.

My dad drove me to school like always, only now we passed by the new mall they were building. Seventeen new stores and a tall pointy tower with a hole for a clock to go in. Every morning I looked up at that tower with the skeleton scaffold and I saw how those men walked around up there—so free and easy, the same way my dad had to when he was building houses—when they knew the ground was down there, one false move and they were meat.

I thought about Maureen. Her straight black hair with the grey wing lifting out of the part. I thought about when I was little and still going with her to church, bowing my head for the Our Father and getting the screaming jeebies every time.

I thought about her all alone in the house at the end of the road, the

house I'd lived in since I was five, when my real mom took off and Maureen, who was my mom's best friend back then, took me and my dad in to stay.

I thought about calling, but I felt like my dad would know somehow, even if I called from a friend's place, or even from the payphone in the lobby at school. Worse than that, I thought about Maureen's face. The way it cracked open when they told me, and I saw how a person's heart really was fragile, as fragile as the teacups Maureen kept on the highest shelf. From her mother's family in Ireland, she said. You can see clean through them in the sunlight, Robin. They'll break if you don't hold them right.

Roberta took me into their room one time when my dad was out. The bedcovers were all twisted up like somebody'd been fighting there, and there were ashtrays spilling their guts on the carpet. The curtains were pulled half open to where they stuck, I guess. When Roberta put her arm around me I could smell whatever she was drinking the night before, and something hot and sour, and baby powder, and about half a can of Instant Beauty hairspray. I've got some sweaters and stuff I bet you'd like here, Robin. What about this one? The bulb was burnt out in the closet. She reached into the dark and pulled clothes out of the lump on the floor until my arms were piled up to my nose and her smell was all through me, making me sick.

I had to pass by their bedroom on the way to the bathroom. I'd wake up having to go and hold it until my guts were cramping, but sooner or later I'd have to give in. It was one of those hollow veneer doors, and half the time it wasn't closed all the way. I'd hear Roberta giggling in there, or else the sound of a bottle getting knocked on the floor, or once I heard her saying, fuck me fuck me, down deep in her throat like a dog—and then a whimper that must've been him.

After the operation, right after, I came crawling out from under the anaesthetic feeling like they'd taken the wind out of me somehow, like maybe they'd cut my lungs out too. Then I started coughing, hacking up all the crap I had in my chest, and when I saw how much there was, I figured I better quit smoking. The kids I knew all started up around eight or nine in the black maples out back of the school. I knew enough to keep it hidden, until Maureen found a pack under my bed when I was twelve. Just don't go bumming off of me, she told me, and don't even think about stealing because I'll know. I could lift a few off my dad though, and sometimes he even gave me one and put a finger to his lips to make it our secret. Everybody I knew smoked, except really little kids. Nobody believed me when I said I was quitting. The thing was, it scared the shit

out of me coming out of that anaesthetic.

I went without a smoke for a few weeks, but then one night I looked up from the TV and saw Roberta take a long drag and wash it down with a swig of beer. I saw my dad's head beside her, passed out on the back of the couch, and that's when I went in to the kitchen and took a pack out of the carton on the table. I tore my room apart looking for my lighter and when I finally found a book of matches there was only one left. When the first smoke burnt down to the filter I lit another one off the butt. I kept it up for an hour or so I guess, hacking my guts out and not really giving a shit.

One morning there was nobody out working on the new mall. We pulled up at the stoplight and I watched the wind rattle the scaffold and blow garbage under the locked-up trucks.

There was no homeroom that day and we all had to go down to the gym for assembly instead. They wouldn't say why until we were all packed in there, and then they told us to lower our heads and take a minute of silence for Darcie Lenicsek. They passed a couple of photos around the bleachers for anyone who didn't know who she was. She was in my grade eight gym until she broke her thumb trying to do a cartwheel. It was creepy—the thumb was hanging off her hand but she never made a sound. Just bit her lips shut while the blood all drained out of her face. They told us how she'd hung herself from the top of the new clock tower. And how some trucker saw her dangling up there and radioed the cops. And how the cops came and cut her down, just when the sky was getting light.

Holy shit, Roberta said when it came on the newsbreak that night. You know her, Robin? Not really.

I looked over at my dad's face to see what it meant to him, the picture of that girl on the screen and her having killed herself not two miles from where we sat. His eyes were closed, but I could tell by the pucker in his forehead he wasn't sleeping. He was keeping them shut on purpose.

A bunch of us went down to the cemetery on Friday night to see where Darcie was buried. It was a small headstone, almost like the ones they have for babies, and somebody said they make them like that for suicides. There was one of those styrofoam wreaths laid over the dirt, the kind they have down at the horse track, with ribbons and plastic flowers. We held our lighters over the grave to get a better look.

The idea was we'd walk out the old train tracks from there and light a fire, but it never ended up happening. Somebody sat down beside the grave, and then somebody else, until we made a kind of circle around it.

We passed a couple of twenty-sixers around, taking long swallows and closing our throats to keep it down.

It broke up sometime after midnight. Some crawled off to fuck, or get sick in the bushes, and the rest of us laughed our way out of there, past all those crosses and cold slabs of stone.

I ended up on my own somehow, sneaking up on every parked car and truck I came across, twisting off gas caps and chucking them into the bushes. My head filled up with fumes, filled up like a balloon and floated, tied to my neck with a string. For a second I thought about matches, or the lighter in my coat pocket, stuffed in with the smokes I had left.

That's when I saw it. Across the road, way up in the rocks at the back of the old folk's home was a tall, tall sign, all bright and hazy white. I couldn't make out the letters, but I knew well enough they wouldn't spell Welcome.

I was pissed. I ripped my jeans going over the fence and wiped out a few times on the rocks, bad enough to skin both palms and one knee. When I got up close and saw how the signboard was stuck to the post—two fat bolts I'd never force apart—I knew I'd have to take the whole thing. I was small for fourteen. The sign stood a good foot over my head and they'd wedged it in deep, but my mind was made up. I put my shoulder to it, rammed up against it, and fell flat on my ass, and got up and rammed it again.

It was about all I could carry. I had to hook it over my shoulder and drag it behind me down the road, not really knowing where I was going—or knowing, but not seeing the mistake. I was headed for the house at the end of the road. The house with the living room light on, where Maureen would be doing a crossword, not watching the TV but keeping it on.

The streetlights were planted far apart, one dying down at the corner behind me and one far ahead, laying the light down like a blanket beside the dark driveway to home. The sign was cutting into my shoulder. I wanted to lay it down easy and rest, but my fingers weren't working right; it slipped, and the racket it made ran all up and down the road. It gave me the creeps, lying there, all white and still, with dark smears of blood where my grated-up hands had touched the paint, and those letters like shiny black scars. I'll hide it under the hedge, I thought, the high black hedge that runs around the house, and the thought made me smile like a moron. I hoisted the sign up and hooked it over my shoulder again, but that was when the dark filled up with headlights, and the sound of a truck braking, and my dad's boots hitting the road.

I woke up in my old room with a bucket beside me, and a glass of water

and two Tylenol pills. I cried for a minute or so when I saw that. It made me think of Maureen putting them there and my dad behind her in the doorway, or maybe even beside her, watching her pull the covers up around my neck.

Robin.

My dad's voice outside the door.

Robin, get up. I need a hand.

Roberta talked at me the whole time I was throwing our stuff into boxes. Her voice came out all sloppy. She'd been up all night, she kept saying, thinking the two of us were bleeding to death in some ditch somewhere, and now this, now after all that she finds out we were at that bitch's place. She's turned your father's head, Robin. You know he loves me. He'll be back inside of a week.

My dad was outside in the truck. I could hear the engine running.

Soccer Season Opener

Bryant Ibbetson

See number nine, the guy with the ball, number nine, that's him, that's our diva, that's Lefty. See Lefty weave, see him feint, see him streak through the crisp spring morning air. Believe me Lefty's got balls, I mean, shit, during practice, shit, Lefty doesn't even mind going skins. I'd be bashful as hell having a left breast like his and you know what kind of balls I have, me being goalie, huge balls (huge something) and thank God I don't have a left breast like Lefty's got a left breast. We're talking female, the best Goddamn-looking female breast I've ever seen. They call it *Gynecomastia*, what Lefty's got, and Lefty's got it *glandular, glandular, glandular*.

Just one. Just a left. Left from his perspective. Right from yours. Unless you're behind him. And sometimes you are, like we are right now watching Lefty streak and feint and deke and deke and deke and shoot: 1-0, us.

That was his *torpedo*, that shot. He's also got an *outside banana* (put the stem end of a giant banana on your right toe, put the nose in the upper right corner of the net, and there's your trajectory) and of course an *inside banana* and a *riser* and yes, his darling, yes *the hopper* his darling: not quite what you'd think, not a shot that hops at all, but a shot whose movement mirrors that of a hurled live winged grasshopper: straight straight straight straight somewhere.

Notice who sprinted after and mobbed Lefty: nobody.

Oh sometimes we do; once a season, after Lefty's first goal in our first scrimmage in our first practice of the season—he's bound to get one; in six years always has—and you're so excited for your team to score a goal—it's been such a long off-season, so long since you've been part of a team scoring a goal—and it's only a practice but so what, Lefty has scored a goal and he's celebrating and you're sprinting after him and fists pumping in the air you catch up to him and bearhug him from behind and, and, and, and something is not right. And you remember: *glandular tissue*. And for the rest of the season you let Lefty celebrate without you.

Sad, isn't it. Guilty, all of us.

Except me. I don't hug him, and I don't *not* hug him. Why?

Because I'm goalie, of course. Because I'm here in net. If he scores on me in practice, well, of course I'm not going to hug him. If he's on my

side and he scores, well, who the hell expects the goalie to run the length of the field to celebrate with a forward? Shit, I'd be all pooped out and for what, to make a point of hugging a boy with a perfectly developed adult female left breast? Lefty isn't dumb. He'd say, "Josey, what the hell are you doing all the way up the field? Either you're making a point of hugging me in spite of my left breast, or you want to feel me up. Get the hell back in net. I don't need your sympathy."

And he doesn't.

He doesn't need it, and he doesn't *not* need it. Shit, he's more together, more self-possessed, more at home with his left breast, than anyone I know. Lefty, he's settled: on the field, in the change room, in the classroom, on the bus, in the pool, in the heat, in the crisp cold nippy air, he's settled. Secure. Shirts or skins. Father, Son, or Holy Ghost. Shit, during recess the other day Lefty was comparing his breast with the girls, six or seven of them, and Lefty, sitting in a circle cross-legged in the smokers' pit reaching back unclasping their bras, all of them, and Lefty lifting up their shirts and bras and lo and behold if Lefty doesn't have the prettiest breast of all, lo and behold, the most perfect curvature, most skyward-perked nipple, most smooth, most well-defined, most silver-dollar areola, and all the girls looking at Lefty like he's the Goddamn Northern Lights or something so cool and self-assured, so settled in their circle. "And not even a fag," this girl whose locker's next to mine said to me after recess that day, so I said, "Yeah, well I'm not a fag either." "Good for you," she said disparagingly, so I said, "Yeah, well you just wait until Lefty has his breast removed. Let's see just how cool Lefty is *then*," and she and her Godlike ass departed, miffed: the both of them.

At least I *think* she has a Godlike ass, but who am I to judge? I'm fourteen and just three months ago I was trying to suck my own dick. Did I say three months ago? I lied. It was this morning. I guess I figured distance, time displacement that is, would mitigate your horror, would blur, would obscure, would veil your image of me sitting cross-legged, my back against my bedroom door (I have no lock), my hands locked on my feet pulling my head down between my knees, straining and stretching, I think I can I think I can I think I can, stretching and straining, I think I can I think I can, getting close, getting oh so close, getting oh so close to my oh-so-sweet-smelling-to-me crotch, I know I can I know I can I know I can, I can't: fuck! Six inches short every time, every Goddamn time, every fucking Goddamn time, might as well be a foot short, every Goddamn shitty fucking time, might as well be a fucking football field short, fuck!

How can I tell you this?

Hell, I'm a little settled myself.

At least, *by* myself.

In fact, I bet I'm as settled by myself as Lefty is with people. Hell, anybody so settled they try to blow themselves in the morning, then tell you about it that night during a soccer game, shit, that kid's some kind of settled (some kind of something). That's why I'm goalie, because you have to be settled all by yourself to be goalie, because you have to, ah shit, who am I fooling? I'm in net because I got a bum knee.

Not that I feel out of place here in net, not that I feel I don't belong: I do. I love it here. I'm married to my goal crease, I adore my box, I cherish my crossbar, I urinate on my goal posts: I kneel on one knee before the goal post in prayer-like manner, pull my penis from its nappy bed, align it along my inner thigh, and let loose. I'd urinate on the crossbar if I could (and believe me I can), but I probably couldn't do it without people seeing, and besides, urine might drip on me in net, so no, no crossbar-pissing, just goal post-pissing: *you can smell it can't you, can't you, now that I name the smell? Does it not smell kind of good? Is this not my world?*

Sometimes, in net, I even pray.

Dear God, please bless all of us in this, our time of need. Please bless my team. Please bless us that we will play to our potential. Our potential, God, our potential. Bless Ricky to remember to fill the passing lanes. Help Daryl keep his hands down. Help Dinker keep it clean so that he will not be red-carded again and force us to play without him. And God, please give the referee the wind he needs to keep up to us boys, and the confidence to call his own game, unswayed by the barrages of our coaches and our parents. And God, please bless me once again this week with the ability to read the minds of the opposing players and anticipate their self-willed actions, and bless me once again this week with the ability to effect the exact movements in my own body that will influence the opposing players to move and shoot in ways they *think* self-willed. And God, bless us all to be free of injury at game's end. And God, may most deserving of Thy Love team win. Amen.

I'm sorry: I get bored here in net.

I mean it gets *real* boring, prayer boring, desperation boring, even introspection-bordering boring sometimes, here in net, especially since I know what it's like to be out there, to be in the heart of this field, this Mission Firefighters field, this field where five years ago I lost the wind. See, five years ago I used to be up there razzling-dazzling alongside Lefty. I used to be a goal-and-assist man back pre-bum-knee, back prepuberty, back when Lefty was just Peter. Peter and me it used to be, the two of us—one of us assisted, one of us scored—back when I could run like the wind, streak and feint and deke and deke and deke and shoot. Excuse me if I get a little doleful, a little woeful, a little woebegone, a little wistful: I tore my *anterior cruciate* ligament one crisp spring morning five years ago; or should I say someone tore it for me—a leg sweep from behind.

Ligament came off trailing bone, cartilage mutated to the texture of lava stone. I was told to walk it off.

Later, I was taken to the hospital where I waited, waited, was poked around at, was x-rayed, was prodded, waited, waited, waited, until late that night, later, much later, two a.m. or something, I guess it was the next morning, when Dr. Yandel, orthoped, cleaved my knee agape. And before Yandel was done cleaving, done scraping cartilage, done stapling bone and ligament, done stitching, my knee was a half litre of inflammation heavy, and a *staphylococcus* host. And those *staphylococcus* can be nasty little buggers, *nasty*, those *staphylococcus*, those *staphylococcus*, those *staphylococcus*.

They say I nearly died, I could have died, I might have died, but I can't say I remember being near death. I do remember being weak. I remember cast change after cast change as my leg shriveled and shriveled. I remember barely being able to sit up; I remember shitting in bed pans; I remember pissing in stainless steel bottles; I remember sponge baths; I remember. I remember the Hawaii episode of *The Brady Bunch*; *Donnie and Marie*; *Starsky and Hutch*; and a Vincent Price movie where Vincent, in the end, died in a vat of acid, or maybe he didn't die, I can't remember.

I remember many nurses fondly; I remember one bitch.

I remember big-ass syringes and bad-tasting drugs in solo cups and Jell-O-bouncing contests and for lunch having to choose between cow tongue and calf liver.

I remember that nurse, that nurse who said I had no fight. I remember that that nurse said I was lazy and I remember that my mother seemed to agree. I have news for them: I was happy-go-lucky.

I was making squirt guns out of syringes; I was pissing off the candy strippers. I had a stash of Mad magazines Dinker brought me that my parents didn't know about. I did puzzles and crosswords and slept, oh God I slept. I slept whenever I wanted, and so what if I had to wake up and choke down drugs, I could go right back to sleep. I was content: content watching come-and-go nurses and doctors and patients and janitors and friends and family, ministering angels, most all of them, ministering angels.

I knew what was happening, I knew it would take time, I knew I was being reborn; I was being reborn as a goalie.

I kicked the staph, not entirely from my body, but got it localized, got it holed up in my knee in the core of a permanent nylon stitch where my body's antibodies couldn't quite get at it enough to finish it off. (My knee seeped pus for three years, until, finally, my knee under local anaesthetic, the stitch was surgically removed, as I watched: I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up). I got a little stronger. I got so I could lift my leg. I got so I could kind of walk. I got out of the hospital.

So bummed was my knee, for a year I hobbled. I was a homer, a homebody, a homoboy, my so-called friends called me: *We all know that Josey Stewart is gay, Josey Stewart is gay in every way. We all know that Josey Stewart is gay, Josey Stewart is gay in every way.*

After school afternoons I practiced piano and read the Scriptures and played Scrabble and put together puzzles with my mother. Tens of puzzles (*fully interlocking*: infant-play). Forty-seven puzzles to be precise, laminated, a mosaic on my bedroom walls, 31,462 pieces (I always managed to lose one or two pieces each puzzle). And I was happy doing puzzles, I was happy-go-lucky, and because now I was *with* my mother, I was, to my mother, no longer lazy, I was happy-go-lucky, until I gradually and then finally got sick of puzzles, got sick of piano (I still liked Scrabble): I got sick of being *homoboy*.

I'd been out of the loop so long at school I didn't know what the loop was. What words like *gay* and *clitoris* meant, I had no clue. I was so far behind that when someone I thought a buddy of mine asked me to ask this girl I liked how much head she gave, I asked. I asked, "How much head do you give?" She looked at me funny, turned and looked at my friends, who were gaping at us from the other side of the classroom, sneered at them, turned back to me, shrugged her shoulders and said, "How much do you have?" There, I must admit, I was stumped. We were in the fifth grade. Whatever it was, I had to have enough of it, whatever it was. "Enough," I said. She smiled. She looked me up and down. "Enough?" Slowly, she shook her head. "Enough is never enough." She turned and walked away.

And I walked back to my so-called friends and they were pretending to be hard at school work, hardhearted, hard at something.

And what was happening to Peter these years I was out of the loop and out of soccer? He was scoring goals and growing glandular tissue. He was being reborn, as Lefty. And when I was ready, when I was strong enough, when I was puzzle-angry, Lefty got me to practicing with him, got me to playing goalie. He was working on his *bananas* back then: he hadn't yet conceived his *hopper*. And I played goalie and played goalie and played goalie and soon I was no longer playing goalie, I was goalie. You see the difference? You see what I'm talking about here? I don't PLAY goalie. I AM goalie. Did I say GOALIE? I'm not GOALIE, I'm GOD. I'm YAHWEH. I'm JEHOVAH. Just ask the opposition. Ask them how many goals they've scored against the Whitecaps in the last two years (barring Sunday games, because I'm not allowed to play on Sundays). Go ahead, ask them. They're not going to tell you. I will: *nada*.

You watch. Watch and learn. See up there on my left, see how my left defenseman's out of position? Excuse me a minute.

"Dinker! Dinker! You're too wide! Get your ass in."

You watch, I'm going to have to make a save. See the guy with the ball? Kelsey Matichuk, opposition center. Led the Firefighters in both goals and assists last year. Goes to that preppy Okanagan Mission school. His mother calls him Keeseey: Kelsey Matichuk, team captain, number 10 (Pele, Maradona, Steffenhagen, Lafleur). Kelsey Matichuk, twin of the less-gifted-at-soccer-but-more-gifted-in-other-areas Grant Matichuk, Mission Firefighters, substitute defenseman. Kelsey's been working on his left foot lately, still, it's nothing like his right. See that touch, see that dart, see that give-and-go? Look at that shit, he's no Sissy Spacek, that's for sure. Look at him. Come on, Dinker, you got him, you got him—nope, he's going to get a shot off—get down, get ready, out a few yards. I'm going to pastiche your crossbar-happy ass, Keeseey buddy, Keeseey, you song-and-dance man you. Should I challenge? No, fake the challenge, make him go wide, and this is why I AM goalie and not why I PLAY goalie: it's part me telling him what to do and part me knowing what he'll do. Oh sure, I couldn't possibly know, no, I couldn't, you're right, too many possibilities, right, yup, too many permutations, oh for sure, yup, yup, chaos theory, yup, of course, of course, yup, improbability, no doubt, yup, excuse me, I have a save to make.

Where was I? Was I thinking about how ten years from now I'll be looking back on trying to suck my own dick, and not truly remembering the pain of puberty, not understanding, be repulsed? Or was I thinking about Lefty, about when he's stopped growing and the doctors are fairly settled there'll be no growth spurts in his future, about when he gets his left breast, at least the female portion of it, removed? He's shown me brochures: *When glandular tissue causes the overdeveloped contour, it is removed through a small incision around the nipple-areola complex. The results are excellent. The undesirable contour is removed, restoring the normal male breast shape.*

Normal; what will Lefty be like then? Will he still be so self-assured, so settled? God, what will happen? Will he, will he, ah shit, I've got to pull myself together. It's just that making saves make me melancholy, especially when I've been thinking about Lefty, about Lefty. You'd understand if you had seen what I have seen. What I have seen is beauty: I've seen Lefty in homeroom, his arms on his desk, his head on his arms, his breast hanging in that exquisite triangle of space between thigh and chest and desk, his lovely breast. And sometimes, during band, from the trumpet section I stop playing and just watch Lefty blow French horn, his left breast encompassed by all those shapely French horn bends, by all that shining brass. I saw Lefty in the gym at lunch time yesterday in shorts and his IntramurOwls referee shirt, a whistle in his mouth, and Lefty standing on a chair leaning forward against the volleyball net pole, his female breast pushed to one side of the pole, his male breast on the

other, his fingertips resting gently on the net waiting for the black team to serve to the gold team, waiting, waiting, whistle in his mouth. But God, you have to see Lefty naked. Think in a locker room shower dripping wet skin sculptured marble. Think Michelangelo, think David, think David with a woman's left breast.

What will happen when Lefty gets his breast removed? What will happen? What will happen if, all of a sudden breastless, Lefty gets hugs all soccer season long, after every goal? Will that unsettle him, going from no hugs to many hugs? Or will his breast removal off-balance him so much that he can no longer score? Poor Lefty, to have a present so fine and a future so murky. Maybe he should quit soccer altogether. On his *own* terms. The sooner, the better. I would be sad, and our team, most likely, would go from first to who knows, worst, but it isn't all about winning. Maybe if Lefty wasn't so good I wouldn't ask these questions. But first to worst, that would unsettle us all, the *rest* of the team, I mean. All fourteen of us. What if no one stepped up? What if no star forward moved into town? Lefty scores all our goals. I mean, I'm GOD in net, but there's only so much a goalie can do. It would be 0-0, every game, every non-Sunday game that is, and Sunday games we'd probably lose. Is it not better Lefty should play? Is it not better I sacrifice my impulse to urge Lefty to quit now on his own terms, and urge him instead, though I know it will cause him pain and suffering in the end, to play on, play on, play on?

Oh God, I love soccer. I love *all* of it: the practices, the team meetings, the games. You know what I love most of all? I love half-time. I love hanging with the team around the gallon bucket of quartered oranges, grabbing at the oranges with our grimy mitts, sucking them back, one wedge after another, knowing we're winning, and that we still have another half to play. And most of all, I love when Lefty and I head down to my new crease to warm me up for the second half, and I piss on my new posts, and then Lefty comes at me with all his arsenal, and sometimes I can get to the ball, and sometimes I can't, and this is the difference between Lefty and everyone else I face: I can never tell Lefty where to go; I just kind of get an idea where he's going and hope I get there before the ball.

See him up there waiting behind the center line? See him like that? He's sensing something. I can see it, I can feel it. See our midfielder, the guy with the ball? He's looking, he's looking, he's looking for Lefty. And here we go: Lefty's on a breakaway, Lefty's got a breakaway. He's streaking, he's streaking, he's streaking, oh my God, see that deke, see him just dribble it in: 2-0, us.

Please excuse me. Lefty, you scored! Fuck you, Lefty, I'm running after you! I'm going to hug you whether you like it or not! Fuck you, Lefty, I'll get back in net when I want to get back in net!

Good

Mark Wisniewski

Mitch pulled over, threw the Comet in park, and got out.
What are you doing? I asked.
Looking for gold.

Jesus, I thought. I tapped my fingernails against the dash, then cracked my knuckles. Then I glanced up. He was walking away, like he always did when we fought, in jeans and boots, over orange gravel and rocks, toward a mesa beneath the white-blue sky. The heat had already ruined the air-conditioning, so I didn't bother to close his door, just opened mine and stepped out. Wait, I yelled, but he kept walking. I said *wait*.

Even fighting, I realized as I jogged toward him, had become boring. Maybe because everyone else was always keeping us from doing what couples do. My mother was always calling and saying that living together was a sin; Mitch's father—who Mitch worked for—was always drunk and yelling; Mitch or I would usually fall asleep before the other was ready to make love. The desert had been perfect the first time we drove through it—cool, frightening, quiet, starry—but trying to live there was ruining it.

I caught up to Mitch. You actually think you'll find gold.

Yes.

Can I ask why?

Because I read about it.

And you believe what you read.

Yes.

Okay, I thought, because Mitch was essentially honest. Though sometimes he seemed like a con man. It was weird. I'd believe in his dreams enough to have them myself, but then something would always go wrong. Nothing that was ever his fault; but nothing that was my fault, either.

It was in a history book, he said. They mined tons of the stuff in this area.

Where'd you read a history book?

Barber shop.

That answer seemed crazy for maybe a second because the strangeness of the desert felt even stranger whenever you went into town.

The lode was under the county line, Mitch said. These two mining companies had all sorts of fights about property.

We were walking in step now. So where do we dig?

We don't. We look for a creek bed. When that storm came through last night, it dug for us.

Sounds logical, I said, because a storm *had* come through, waking Mitch enough for him to kiss me.

He quickened our pace, and I felt kind of wet. Maybe it was sweat; maybe it was sweat and excitement. I looked behind us: no cars were approaching, and the heat on my shoulders felt right.

That was the thing about desert heat. Inside our apartment, I hated it. Under the sun, it burned and I liked how that felt. I knew it could kill, but it also bronzed and tightened, and it felt like it cleaned me and Mitch. Our pores would grow smaller and we'd talk about tightness, and sometimes make love in a cave.

There, Mitch said.

What.

See the dip?

No.

And the brush on either side?

Yeah.

That's our creek bed.

But it's dry.

So?

How could one inch of rain dig up gold?

Depth doesn't matter, Jules. Strength does.

Gooseflesh tickled the back of my neck. This was the Mitch I moved to the desert with: logical, dreamy, sure of himself, at risk. With this Mitch, I needed only to believe. My mother's whining and his father's drinking made believing in us tough, but being alone together helped us to forget them.

We'll walk smack down the gut, he said. I'll go first. I'll watch in front of me and kick as I walk, and you watch whatever I turn up.

As if you're a storm, I thought. Mitch took the lead, and I followed. I was sure of it: we were going to find a nugget—or a chunk. We'd take it to a pawn shop and get more than enough money and maybe be a little bit famous. My mother would quit complaining and Mitch would quit working and we'd wake up and eat when we wanted. We'd enjoy what we needed: direct sunshine, that tightness, and lovemaking.

I watched what he kicked until I began to give up. Can I go first? I asked.

Sure. As long as you kick.

So I took the lead. Kicking made me think of my mother, who always

behind Mitch's back, called him a loser. She was polite to his face, but backstabbed him for not owning a house, a new car, or insurance. The thing was, my father had all that, and she hated him. She'd told him she hated him to his face, with me standing between them. She'd said she'd stay married but hate him.

Jules, Mitch shouted. It won't actually look gold.

What?

It'll be white or pink. You know, quartz. The gold'll be inside it. Like veins.

Walking on, I kicked harder. I was looking for something that glistened. I could never live on Mitch's logic only: his dreams never felt right until they included something from me.

Hold it, he said. I stopped walking and turned. He was bent at the waist, grabbing a pink rock. Check out the size of this thing, he said.

It looked sort of like crystals but was also kind of cloudy, and the sun did its best to shine through it. Veins? I asked.

He dropped it and frowned. I turned and continued kicking. I heard him behind me, closer than before. I kicked harder, took off my T-shirt and hung it from a belt loop on my cut-offs. He said nothing, just followed. He's looking down, I thought. Or watching me and playing coy. Either way, we're headed toward something good.

The sun burned my breasts. We were walking north, away from the highway, so no one could see. Then, overhead, I heard a Cessna. I pictured a pilot—middle-aged, a husband and father—using binoculars, my breasts in his focus. Did Mitch care about that? He did and he didn't. Under sunshine that hot, Mitch was cool. My crotch felt warmer and I walked a little faster, kicking more, looking less, hoping Mitch would yell something to stop me.

Then something ahead sparkled. It was smooth and curved: a ring around what looked like a stick pointing at me.

Holy shit, Mitch said, catching up.

We knelt as I slid off the ring. It's real, I said.

An honest-to-God finger.

That's not a finger, Mitch. It's a stick. I meant the *gold* is real.

That black stuff is skin.

That's bark, Mitch. That's a stick.

I don't think so.

He's doing it, I thought. He's making us sour. His family had its own demons, and through his thoughts, words, and silences, they'd seep into our dreams and poison me.

Your knuckle, he said pointing at a bump in the middle.

That's how sticks are.

I reached for the thing and he grabbed my elbow. Then what do you

call that fingernail?

Where?

I saw it as a fingernail the moment Mitch pointed. It was wedged between the skin and the bone.

Let's call it a stick, I said.

We can't.

My palms squeezed the ring. Why not?

It belongs to someone.

Someone dead, who no one will ever find.

Someone buried here. Someone someone alive is looking for.

You think?

Of course.

If we died out here, Mitch, how long would they look? A few weeks? That thing has been out here forever.

That woman, Mitch said.

Who said it was female?

Who said it wasn't?

Let's go.

Then put back the ring.

No way.

If they're looking for her, they're checking pawn shops for that thing. We pawn it and they'll tie us to her.

We don't know it's female, I said.

If you want to *know*, Mitch said, we could dig up the clothes. He took a grey rock from beside the finger and I grabbed his wrist.

So it could be a woman, he said.

I looked at the ring. It was smooth and nicked like real gold.

And if it isn't, Mitch said, they'll tie us to *him*. Either way we'll have to make up a lie or take them back here. We make up a lie and get caught in it, and we're suspects. We take them here and they'll ask why we didn't report this, and no matter how we answer, we're suspects.

I put on my T-shirt. You're thinking too much.

Clutching the grey rock, Mitch pointed his chin at the ring. That's their best piece of evidence. They'll check out everyone it leads to.

Then we won't pawn it.

Then what good is it?

We could wear it.

We?

We could take turns.

Why would we want to do that?

To have a secret.

It wouldn't *be* secret. People will see it and ask about it. It's a wedding band, for Christ sake.

I realized then that Mitch would never marry me. But I knew that given the way families are, I didn't want marriage: I wanted something good that could last.

We'll wear it only when we're alone, I said. Only when we're indoors making love. It'll be like a marriage, but sexy. Which might be exactly what we need.

Mitch's face stiffened. I offered him the ring, on my palm. As he studied it, the sun made it glisten—at least from my angle. He pinched it between the finger and thumb of his free hand and held it in front of his face, then directly in front of his right eye. The eye glared at me solidly, as if he were considering making love on that creek bed, and I shivered and the sun's heat felt cooler. Then he slid the ring onto the fourth finger of his left hand, which still held the grey rock, and pushed it down to the second joint: as far as it would go.

Doesn't fit, he said, and he took it off. But you could wear it.

I took the ring from him and slid it onto my fourth finger.

It went all the way—easily.

Too big, he said.

If you want to say that.

You don't want me to?

No.

Why not?

Because I want us to be better, Mitch. I want us to have more zip.

Scratching the side of his neck, he glanced at me. Zip?

Yeah. You know: *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah*.

And wearing this would help?

For me, at least.

And we'd only wear it indoors?

Only when we're about to make love.

And we'd keep it secret.

Yes.

And you'd find that sexy.

Yes.

Mitch tossed the grey rock over his shoulder.

Wouldn't you? I asked.

It might be a little scary. But I guess that could be sexy.

Sexy, I said, almost has to be scary.

I turned toward the highway, where the Comet sat waiting.

At least for me, I said.

Mitch touched the finger, then began piling rocks to bury it.

You mind helping? he asked.

I handed him rock after rock until the finger was gone. Then we walked up the gut without speaking. The Comet was still open, and we got in and

took off, and I slid the ring into the tiny pocket inside the right-front pocket of his jeans. He remained silent while I did that, but after we accelerated through a shady pass created by dynamite, he faced me and nodded quickly—as if sort of scared—and then we both faced the road and rolled on.

Contributors

Elyse Gasco's work has appeared in *PRISM international* 34:2, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *Grain*, *The Malahat Review*, and other journals. She recently won the 1996 Journey Prize, and three of her stories are to be featured in the next edition of *Coming Attractions* (Oberon Press). She has completed a collection of linked stories and is currently experimenting with a novel. She lives in Montreal.

Cinda Gault is a doctoral candidate in English at York University, and specializes in Canadian Literature. Her story arises from a near miss with her youngest son, and it is dedicated to parents who have suffered direct hits.

Angela Grossman was born in London, England. She graduated from ECIAD in 1985 and received her Masters Degree from Concordia in 1991. She lives on the West Coast with her husband and son, and divides her time between Vancouver and Amsterdam. Her work is represented in Canada by the Diane Farris Gallery, in Vancouver, and the Garnet Press Gallery in Toronto.

Kenneth J. Harvey's seventh book is *The Great Misogynist*. He has been nominated for national and international literary awards, and has been published in several countries. His non-fiction has been widely printed in publications such as the *The Globe & Mail*, *The Ottawa Citizen* and *Books in Canada*. His weekly editorial column appears in the *The Telegraph Journal*. He is currently Writer-in-Residence at the University of New Brunswick.

Andrew Hewitt grew up in Toronto. He now lives with his wife and two children in Cambridge, England.

Bryant Ibbetson was born and raised in Kelowna, British Columbia. He has recently published stories in *Event*. He now lives in Gainesville, Florida, where he is in a Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Florida. Though he hasn't played soccer in more than ten years, he still considers himself a soccer goalie.

Michael Kenyon has published five books, most recently *Durable Tumblers* (Oolichan, 1996) and *Twig* (Outlaw Editions, 1996). His first published story appeared in *PRISM international*, 20:4. He lives on North Pender Island.

Nigel Maister is a South African writer, playwright and director. His fiction has appeared in *New Contrast* and *Lynx: Contemporary South African Writing* (Penguin, 1990), amongst others. He is currently the Associate Director of the International Theater Program at the University of Rochester.

Jean McNeil was born in 1968 and grew up in Cape Breton. She now lives in London, England. Her first novel, *Hunting Down Home*, was published in the United Kingdom in 1996. Her story, "The Rainy Season," was a runner-up in last year's PRISM *international* Short Fiction Contest.

Mark Wisniewski's novel, *Confessions of a Polish Used Car Salesman*, was published recently by Hi Jinx Press (Davis, CA). Over sixty of his short stories have appeared in magazines such as *The Missouri Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *American Short Fiction*, and *Paris Transcontinental*. His first poem is forthcoming in *Poetry*.

Alissa York has published stories in *The New Quarterly* and *eye wuz here*, an anthology published by Douglas & McIntyre. She lives in British Columbia with her husband.

Creative Writing M.F.A. U.B.C.

The University of British Columbia offers a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing. Students choose three genres to work in from a wide range of courses, including: Poetry, Novel/Novella, Short Fiction, Stage Plays, Screen & TV Plays, Radio Plays, Writing for Children, Non-Fiction and Translation. A course in Editing and managing a Literary Magazine is also offered. All instruction is in small workshop format or tutorial. The thesis consists of imaginative writing. The Creative Writing Program also offers a Diploma Programme in Applied Creative Non-Fiction.

Faculty

Sue-Ann Alderson
Keith Maillard
George McWhirter
Jerry Newman
Linda Svendsen
Peggy Thompson
Bryan Wade



For further information, please write:

Creative Writing Program
University of British Columbia
Buchanan E462-1866 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C., Canada V6T 1Z1

He says: You must stop imagining that this is the end of the world. You know that he is speaking relatively, but you also know, just the way Einstein knew, that imagination is more important than knowledge.

from *These Are Ghost Stories*

by Elyse Gasco

Judge's Essay

Kenneth J. Harvey

Fiction Contest Winners

Elyse Gasco

Cinda Gault

Andrew Hewitt

Bryant Ibbetson

Michael Kenyon

Nigel Maister

Jean McNeil

Mark Wisniewski

Alissa York

Cover Art: "Bearing Violets" by Angela Grossman

ISSN 0032.8790