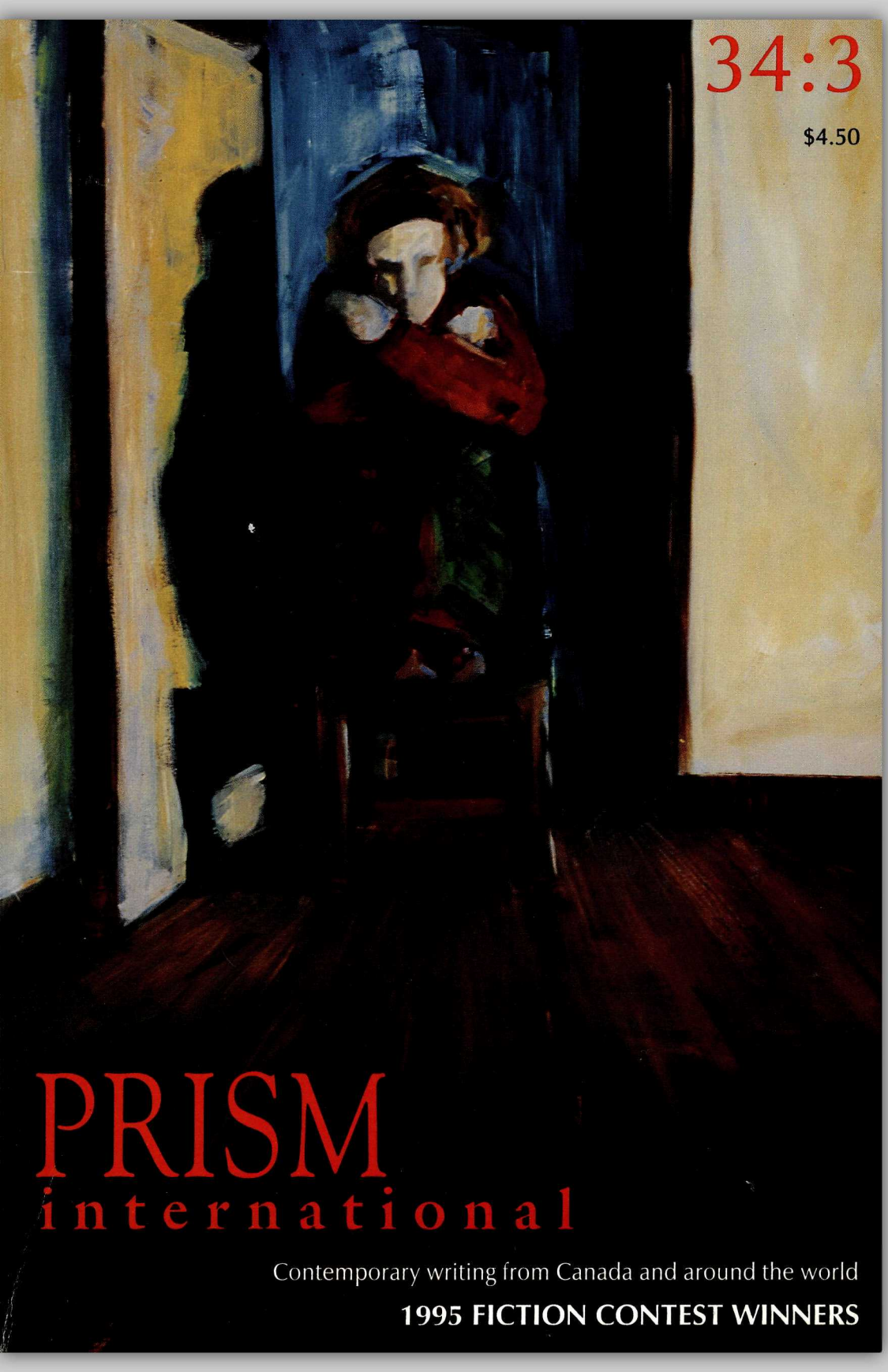

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Contents

Vol. 34, No.3 Spring 1996

Judge's Essay

Diane Schoemperlen Making It New 7

Fiction

Donald Anderson Wonder Bread 34
J. A. Hamilton How to Have Heart Disease (Without Really Trying) 51
Patty Jones Falling Fish 9
Cammie McGovern Among the Headhunters of Formosa 20
Jean McNeil The Rainy Season 79
Anne Simpson The Memory Theatre Of Guilio Camillo 67

Cover Art

Karla Livingston Crush

Contributors 98

1995 Prism International Fiction Contest Winners

$2000 Prize:	Patty Jones, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada "Falling Fish"
$200 Prize:	Cammie McGovern, Palo Alto, California, USA "Among the Headhunters of Formosa"
$200 Prize:	J. A. Hamilton, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada "How to Have Heart Disease (Without Really Trying)"
$200 Prize:	Anne Simpson, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada "The Memory Theatre of Guilio Camillo"
$200 Prize:	Jean McNeil, Brighton, East Sussex, UK "The Rainy Season"
$200 Prize:	Donald Anderson, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA "Wonder Bread"

1995 HONOURABLE MENTIONS:

Gerda Saunders, USA "Blessings on the Sheep Dog"

Alex Blake Smith, USA "Like Hell"

Kang Liao, USA "The Little Red Book"

Norman Ravvin, Canada "A Story With Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish"

Urs Frei, Canada "The Wishing Box"

John Lavery, Canada "You, Judith Kamada"

There were 587 entrants in the 1995 Short Fiction Contest. We received manuscripts from across North America and around the world. Our congratulations to the winners and our thanks to every writer who entered. Special thanks to our judge, Diane Schoemperlen, and our contest managers, Bonnie Hoeflicker and Rick Maddocks.

Making It New

Diane Schoemperlen

I've judged several fiction contests in recent years and this was certainly one of the most enjoyable. All twelve of the short-listed stories had much to recommend them. This made for happy reading but also, of course, for difficult decision-making. I judged these stories by the same high standards I apply to anyone's writing, including my own.

First and foremost, a successful short story must be original. Even if the writer has chosen to write about a subject or theme which has been written about many times before (and most of them have!), the writer must find a way to make the material new again. The writer must have something to say, something true to his or her own personal vision. The story needs focus, clarity, honesty, and it must amount to something in the end. Stylistically, a writer needs to make the language strong and clear and brave again. In less tangible areas, a successful short story must also contain tension, intimacy, immediacy, and a dynamic movement towards its own resolution. The reader must be drawn into the fictional world by the writer's use of all the techniques available. The story, finally, must be more than the sum of its parts. If the writer has succeeded, the reader will be left with a sense of satisfaction and the story will be remembered long after it was first read.

If my faith in the future of writing was at all in jeopardy, reading these twelve wonderful stories has completely restored it. I fully expect that the writers of these stories will go on to become familiar names to all of us.

Falling Fish

Patty Jones

In the back seat of a taxicab going west on Broadway at 4:30 on a Friday afternoon, a young woman in a black sweater sat staring out the window. She was tall and slender, with an olive complexion and close-cropped brown hair, and might have looked rather chic were it not for the fact that she was alternately chewing her nails and scribbling with a ballpoint pen, also showing signs of having been chewed, on a small writing pad of faux granite design. It didn't help that at the moment her short hair was sticking up in the back in a way that made her look as though she had just jumped out of bed, which, in fact, she had. The scribbling was merely a shopping list consisting of corn tortillas, bananas, ricotta cheese and a drawing of a group of tiny chickens. She had scribbled these things to create the effect of busyness, but, of course, there was no one in the cab other than herself and the driver, who was seemingly occupied at bringing the cab to a kind of critical velocity. She frowned at the group of tiny chickens, whose ridiculousness was heightened by the faux granite, and by the fact that they were badly drawn, with heads crudely disproportionate to their bodies. The situation had nothing to do with tiny chickens. The situation was that she was on her way to meet her husband at his parents' house for dinner. A dinner with his parents would have been enough. After turning sixty-five they had become truly terrifying, she thought. His mother was a talker. His father spent hours in a claw-footed bathtub, surrounded by stacks of National Geographic magazines. At that very moment, her husband would be standing at the living room window holding a miniature spinach and cheese quiche on a paper doily, watching for her arrival. Staring out the taxicab window, she saw a woman in a long plaid skirt riding a bicycle. On the sidewalk a man rattled the door of a newspaper box. She was thinking about how it was that she no longer loved her husband and now today she had slept with another man for the first time since her marriage. In a moment she would be standing in an avocado green kitchen holding a miniature quiche on a paper doily.

"Oh, Inez," Jean exclaimed. "The things that happen! Come, come see what fell out of the sky." Jean took her by the arm and led her out into the sloping backyard. Jean was her husband Ray's mother. The day they were

introduced, Jean had taken Inez by the arm to show her Ray's old bedroom, which Inez had thought boring, full of the usual pennants and poorly constructed model airplanes. Jean had been taking her by the arm ever since.

There was a rusty swingset at the bottom of the yard and Ray and his father, Jimmy, were crouched beside it looking at something in the grass. Jean's dog, a fat Sheltie, lay sleeping in a matted heap on an ancient lounge chair. Inez remembered Jean telling her that when Ray was a child he liked to shoot spitballs at the metal legs of the swingset, making patterns. "He was always pretending something or other," Jean had told Inez.

Inez sighed. Walking through the grass towards her husband, she thought she could have used a miniature spinach and cheese quiche to hold in her hand. "What *are* they looking at?" she asked Jean.

Ray stood up and stepped backwards from the thing in the grass.

"My Lord, how a fish fell out of the sky, I don't know," Jean said. "Living and breathing and flip-flopping itself around in our backyard. Isn't that amazing?" Jean gave Inez's arm an excited pinch. Inez felt she should respond in kind and pinch her back, but Jean had already dropped Inez's arm, running awkwardly in pink shower sandals through the overgrown grass to take hold of Ray.

"Dying now, looks like," Inez heard Ray say. She walked towards them, slowly. She had an idea that there was something horribly immoral in running to see a fish dying in somebody's backyard. Her head was beginning to pound. She remembered giving the last of her aspirin to the taxi driver. "Ever get a migraine headache?" he had asked, looking at her in the rearview mirror. It seemed to Inez that he said this in the manner of a come-on. "When I get a migraine, I lose my vision in one eye and one side of my body goes numb. You would think it would be the same side, but it never is. I got a little twitch in one eye, means it's coming on," he said. Why would a person make up such a thing? she had thought, and gave him her aspirin. Later she wasn't sure that he hadn't been lying. When she got out of the cab in front of Jean and Jimmy's house, he'd said, "You look good in black. You should always wear black."

There was a fish dying in the grass.

"What is it? Salmon?" Ray asked.

"Well, I'd say that was a salmon," Jimmy said, standing up, his hands in the pockets of brown corduroy pants.

"Oh, it's terribly ugly, isn't it? Look at him, his poor ugly mouth," Jean said, giggling a little. "Oh, goodness!" She gave a little scream as the fish flopped in the direction of her pink shower sandals.

Inez watched the fish in the grass. She felt a little unsteady. An hour ago she was in bed with another man. Now, here she was watching a fish

die beside her husband's old swingset.

"I don't want to watch something die!" she said. "Get a bucket of water, can't we?"

The other three looked at her, startled.

"Oh, honey," Ray said. "Look, the fish is dead." The four of them stared down at the fish. It was dead.

"Something like this happening in the middle of an afternoon, I love it," Jean said. "Oh, here, here, I was holding this for you when you came in and I forgot all about it." She held out a spinach and cheese quiche to Inez. "Take it, take it. I didn't make them. You know I don't like to make things." Inez took the miniature quiche and held it carefully in her hand on its paper doily. Now she had no idea what to do with it.

"Can't put a fish such as this in fresh water anyway," Jimmy said, suddenly. "Salmon is a saltwater fish."

"Well, where did your mind go, I wonder?" Jean said. She turned her back on him.

"There was a show on television," she said to Inez. "The great dramatic moment when the salmon swims upstream to spawn and die. That means *river,"* she said to Jimmy.

"There you go," Ray said.

"Back in a minute," Jimmy said. He went towards the house.

"It's no good doing all the reading that he does if you're just going to forget it all," Jean said to Inez. She didn't seem to care if Jimmy heard or not. "What's the use of something becoming nothing?"

Inez, holding the quiche, had no answer for this, but Jean didn't appear to expect one. Apparently, the fish had fallen from the sky. It was like something from a story, a fish falling out of the sky—like the cow jumped over the moon or raining cats and dogs. In a myth, the fish would have come as a warning, evidence of chaos brought upon an ordered universe.

"The fish just fell out of the sky?" Inez asked Ray, thinking suddenly that she should take hold of his hand rather than the quiche. She felt sorry that he should be leaning against his childhood swingset with a dead fish at his feet and be unloved by his wife. Perhaps she had doomed the marriage from the beginning by her disinterest in the model airplanes he had built as a child.

"Oh, I like the way that sounds," Jean said. "The fish simply dropped out of the clear blue sky. That's me. Always a romantic," she said to Inez.

"Really?" Inez said.

"I think you're missing the romance of reality," Ray said mildly. "An eagle was carrying the fish in its talons, it got tired or lost its hold somehow and it dropped the fish. I'm inclined to find that infinitely more interesting, in that that's what really happened."

"Oh wow, can I say I'm sorry he grew up?" Jean said to Inez. "Where did all that imagination go? I used to wish he wouldn't tell so many lies. Oh well, I guess I'll go stir some lumps into the gravy. That's my little joke. Why don't you come?" she said to Inez. "Come hop up on the kitchen counter so we can talk."

Inez shook her head. "My head feels a little hot. I think I'll sit outside for a moment," she said, thinking that she would very much like to go for a drive somewhere. She liked the idea of having someone else drive, while she sat in the back seat and looked out the window at whatever passing scenery there might be. She could think about things or not think about them as she chose. No doubt, if she felt tired, she would just go to sleep. She remembered enjoying being taken for drives as a child, listening to her mother's voice telling the names of wildflowers along the way. Bleeding heart, bachelor's button, lady's slipper—she remembered thinking that those weren't their real names, just names given to them by her mother.

"Just push that lazy dog off that lounger," Jean said, walking over to the lounge chair and standing over the dog. "Wake up, wake up now, baby," she said to the dog. The dog lifted its head to look at Jean. It seemed unsure as to what was expected of it. Jean bent down and took off a shower sandal and smacked it abruptly against the dog's rear end. The dog jumped down and stood there dully.

"Oh, well," Inez said, thinking that the dog, uninteresting as it was, had been enjoying its nap.

"Not at all, not at all," Jean said. "She likes nothing better than to run through the yard getting some good exercise." She'd better start soon, Inez thought. She recalled hearing that on walks the dog rode in a shopping cart.

Jimmy came out of the house carrying a baby's bathtub filled with water.

"Now what?" Jean said.

"You'll see," Jimmy said, walking towards the fish.

"We don't want to see, do we?" Jean said to Inez. Inez ignored her, watching Jimmy.

"Ray's baby bathtub," Jean said to Inez.

"Oh," Inez said. The baby that grew up to be unloved by its wife, she thought. She was beginning to feel giddy.

Jimmy set the bathtub down on the grass and crouched beside the fish. He seemed to be saying something to it. Inez felt sorry for Jimmy. Doubtless he'd rather talk to a dead fish than to Jean.

"What's he saying to that fish?" Jean said.

"I think it's an apology," Ray said, reaching for Inez's hand. Feeling the quiche, he put his hand back in his pocket.

The dog jumped back up onto the lounge chair. What kind of a dog doesn't notice a recently deceased salmon in its own backyard? Inez thought.

"Oh, a bad dog, a bad dog," Jean said to the dog. She seemed delighted by the dog's disobedience. "What a character," she said to Inez, squeezing her arm.

"Never mind," Inez said.

Jimmy had put the fish in the bathtub of water.

"Poor Jimmy, he's hoping for a resurrection," Jean said, winking at Ray and Inez. She turned and began walking towards the house, shower sandals slapping in the wet grass.

Inez stepped over to the lounge chair and tucked the quiche beneath the sleeping dog. The dog wasn't clean at all and it seemed possible that the quiche could go unnoticed for days and eventually become one with the matted fur.

"We'll see what happens now," Jimmy said, and looked down at the dead fish in the baby's bathtub as though he thought he might have accidentally worked a spell over it. "Let him rest," he said, looking Inez in the eye. What an odd man, she thought. She felt she should say something encouraging. She was aware that her recent infidelity probably accounted for her sudden feelings of goodwill towards the entire family. In another minute she might be sorry that the dog had to walk around with quiche stuck in its fur. Guilt manifested itself in innumerable ways. Her problem was that she hadn't begun to feel awful yet about sleeping with the man she met in a bookstore that afternoon. On the contrary, thinking about the whole experience made her feel happy and relaxed. The man—they hadn't gotten to names—had smelled good and was carrying a tape of Chopin's *Nocturnes* in his coat pocket. There was something to be said for only knowing a few simple things about another person, she thought. She wasn't sorry about the afternoon, only sorry about her husband whom she was sure she'd once loved and now she thought that she no longer did.

"It's a very handsome fish," she said to Jimmy. He looked down at the fish, nodding his head, as though he had merely been waiting for someone else to recognize what he had known all along. The fish's looks did seem to improve with water. Dying in the grass, its mottled silvery green skin had looked dull and heavy as if the brightness might be rapidly going out of it. Now in the baby's bathtub the fish had acquired an aspect of colour and light that made it, if not handsome, then somewhat handsome—more than reasonable for a fish. Resurrection is at hand, she thought, and then couldn't believe she was thinking this.

"I think he may have wagged a fin there," Jimmy said, pointing at a fin.

"Oh!" Inez said. The fin was not wagging now, and showed no signs of

having been wagged recently. Why was it that people were always looking for more and more unreasonable ways of fooling themselves? It was reprehensible.

Some time ago, Inez had attended a women's discussion group. The group had been suggested by her doctor after she'd mentioned during a routine check-up that she'd recently spent an entire day in the linen closet, shaving lint from the bath towels and crying, the reason for which being a mystery. She'd gone to the group meeting out of curiosity and because at the time she couldn't think of a reason not to go. Really, the crying had taken her aback. Inez had never considered herself a crier, and crying of this kind, the kind that involves uncontrollable sobbing and shaking and gasping for the greater part of a day, she found absolutely shocking.

The group was composed of various types of women—though she seemed to recall, perhaps unfairly and possibly incorrectly, that quite a few had had rather dull, stringy hair—but she had supposed that any one of them might know a thing or two about crying and hopefully some prevention techniques. The women sat on cushions in a circle on the floor in their stocking feet. Inez had felt absurdly pleased looking at all those feet in their socks and panty hose. It made her think of when, as a young child, she had looked forward to those moments in kindergarten when all the children were allowed to remove their shoes and dance to Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* on a red carpet. Inez didn't remember liking anything else about kindergarten, only this.

But as soon as the women opened their mouths, she knew it was not going to go well. A woman wearing a mint-green sweater with large satin appliqués on the front stood up, clapped her hands to get everyone's attention, and then began talking in a grim, dogged manner about how unfair everything was. "I am a woman," the woman said. "No one cares for me. Men don't care for me, the government doesn't care for me. Therefore, I must care for myself. I must care for myself," she said flatly and sat down, plucking at an appliqué situated over one breast. Inez had thought at first that the appliqués were fish, but it had become apparent that they were giant bows. It might have been better if they were fish, she thought. The woman was standing once more. "We must care for ourselves," she said with ominous vigor. "We must," several women murmured halfheartedly. How dreary, Inez thought. Of course, she'd been wrong about things like this before. Obviously the socks business had been merely a stupid misinterpretation.

The women had continued talking in this vein of grinding dissatisfaction for a while. Inez heard women say things like, "I am a worthwhile person. No matter what anyone else thinks of me, I like myself. I am fine. I am doing fine. I will be fine." Life has not done well by these women, Inez had thought. Or perhaps they had not done well by it. She suspected

that such tricks, telling oneself lines that one has learned in the hopes of improving a situation, were gestures of preposterous naiveté. Whatever had gone on with these women in the past, it was clear that they would continue to go about things the wrong way.

Now, standing in Jean and Jimmy's backyard staring down at a handsome dead fish in a baby's bathtub, Inez wondered for the first time if hers was a life in which rationality (she had always thought of herself this way, as someone living her life with rationality) was not really rationality, but a kind of naive composure. That was it, she had mistaken composure for rationality. She stared down at the fish and thought of herself as a child dancing without her shoes on a red carpet. Then, she had known what she liked. She had liked to stand on tiptoe, being certain that this was what was meant by *en pointe,* and of all the music from *The Nutcracker*, she had liked the "Waltz of the Flowers" best. After that, it seemed, she had gotten things mixed up or perhaps important information about living one's life well had somehow bypassed her. It was as if, having once learned to stand *en pointe,* she had been given no further instructions, and so had been left tiptoeing through life, arms extended painfully, until there was nothing left to do but sit down on the carpet again and wait. She imagined herself sitting cross-legged, hands folded neatly in her lap, just as she had done in kindergarten. She had waited a long time, but as no one ever came along to tell her what to do, she had eventually resumed her tiptoeing.

The result of it all, the result of all that tiptoeing and waiting, was this present situation of a husband she did not love and the episode of sleeping with a stranger that afternoon. She remembered again that she had enjoyed being with the man. She did know that. She didn't recall there being many repercussions when she had been a child. Now, there were always repercussions. And this fish that had fallen out of the sky. She was staring down at the fish. It was equivocal. It might be anything. You stupid fish, she thought.

"It was a very small waggle," Jimmy was saying.

Watching Jimmy stare at the fish, Inez felt a peculiar sensation of fatigue that came from the unexpected discovery that somewhere along the way she had lost track of herself. *A grand discovery*—she would have liked to tell it to herself in that way: *in that moment I made the grand discovery.* After all, there were never enough grand moments. But that wouldn't be true. She saw at once that she was being silly. There was nothing grand about her discovery. It was undeniably ordinary; it was banal. People lost track of themselves and later discovered the fact, all the time. Only the fish could be said to have dropped unexpectedly, and not at all grandly, into the situation.

"Well, easily missed," Jimmy said, his voice trailing off. He had turned

towards the house where Jean stood at the kitchen window, performing a kind of semaphore with a wooden gravy spoon and a large meat fork and exclaiming soundlessly in their direction. Really, the woman was more than a little squirrely, Inez thought.

"Back in a minute," Jimmy said, more to the fish than to anyone else, and trotted towards the house.

Ray was standing a few feet away with his back to her, looking up at the sky and humming what sounded like the Rolling Stones song "Paint It Black." The thought emerged in Inez's mind that the stranger had also been humming something when they had come upon each other in the bookstore that afternoon. She had badly wanted something by the Czech writer Kundera, anything, but those books were strangely absent from the shelves. During her search she was increasingly aware of someone humming in the background and the sound seemed to grow louder with her mounting frustration. The humming made her mad, and just when she was about to tap the stranger on the shoulder and ask him to cease his terrible humming, he had unexpectedly turned around and smiled at her. It was a smile of such startling warmth and palpability that she imagined the stranger had in that moment reached out and stroked her hair. No sooner had this odd thought passed through her mind, than it was followed by another: the man held in his hand one of the very books she wanted. "What was that you were humming?" she had asked him, thinking that perhaps it was a piece of some complexity. "Chopin. From *Nocturnes*. Andante sostenuto, although I'm a little uncomfortable in G minor. Do you like Chopin?" and from inside his jacket pocket he had pulled out a cassette tape, holding it out to her as though it were a bouquet of flowers, smiling, and this time she'd had the strange sensation of being lightly kissed on each of her eyelids.

"Well, I think I'll go sit in the car for a moment. Just for a moment," Inez said to Ray's back, thinking that a smile like that, a smile that was both warm and palpable, was a lovely thing.

"Inez," said Ray, stopping humming. He turned around and came over to stand close to her. "Inez," he said again, looking at her. She waited for him to say something more, but that seemed to be all there was.

Ray turned, a little awkward, to look down at the fish in the bathtub. "You stupid fish," he said to it. Everyone talks to the fish, Inez thought. Of course, it was still dead. Life went on around the fish, people spoke to it, and it knew nothing. She stared at a mole on the back of Ray's neck. It was rather a large flat mole, but mostly hidden by Ray's wavy dark hair and she had always liked it, thinking she was the only person to know a mole was under there. There was some slender meaning in that, she had thought, a wife's discovery of a mole hidden beneath her husband's hair. But undoubtedly that crazy Jean had beaten her to the mole long ago.

"I think I'll need the car keys," she said, looking at the mole.

"You're going to sit in the car?" Ray asked.

"I'm going to sit in the car only for a moment. Then I'll come in and have dinner," Inez said.

"Well, maybe I'll come, too. I was thinking about sitting in the car. I was thinking about painting the car, but I was thinking about sitting in it first," Ray said. "To see what's what."

They walked through the long grass down to the wooden gate at the end of the yard. Ray opened the gate to the back lane. Ray's car, a brown '72 Mustang convertible with its top up, was parked there in the dirt. There was a smell of dirt on the air.

"A fresh coat of paint will certainly restore this car to a former state of glory," Inez said kindly, thinking, as she always did, that the car suffered from an incurable and utter lack of presence.

"It's a car with a lotta guts," Ray said and he patted the Mustang's hood in a tender fashion.

Ray put one hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out various folded and wadded up bits of paper, making small piles on the hood, before coming up with the car keys. Inez leaned against a rear door and thought idly of the number of times she had removed similar pieces of paper from Ray's pockets before doing laundry or taking the clothes to be dry cleaned. She had pondered, on occasion and in a desultory way, how it was that she had never felt sufficient curiosity to unfold one of the many pieces of paper and examine its contents. The desire to do so was apparently absent in her. Other wives, she knew, did this, with sometimes startling results. One of Inez's friends discovered that her husband had been sending money orders to an unaccredited college of ventriloquism in Atlanta, Georgia; another that her husband was in regular correspondence with a female inmate of a nearby penitentiary. The woman was imprisoned due to her relentless cheque forgery. Reading the letters, the man's wife found the inmate to be neither literate nor remorseful about her crimes, and she had immediately instigated a trial separation from her husband. Reflecting on all of this, Inez supposed that she, Inez, had not been the very picture of a diligent wife and now, after the episode this afternoon with The Man With No Name—as she had begun to think of him, recalling the Clint Eastwood movies—nor was she the very picture of a loving wife.

Ray was strolling around the Mustang squinting at its metallic brown paint. Inez picked up the keys from where they lay on a little heap of worn folded paper, opened the car door and climbed into the back seat. She lay down with her head by the far door. She felt she should have some idea about things, a plan, but nothing had come to mind. She was thinking about the afternoon and finding it all inconclusive. There had

been a palpable moment with a stranger and then a fish had fallen out of the sky. She had thought briefly that the fish might be going to tell her something, remembering stories that had been told to her as a child, stories in which a fox looked like a fox but was really something else in disguise. Then the fox was called an allegory. There were always foxes in these stories. There had been one story in which a fox stole acorns from squirrels and carrots from rabbits; it came out that the fox was not really a fox but avarice. In the end, a rabbit had had its tail bitten off by the fox and this had made Inez cry. She didn't want to be similarly undone by a fish.

Inez sighed. She recognized it as the sigh she often gave just before falling asleep at night. She could simply go to sleep, she thought, curled up in the Mustang's back seat. She decided to try closing her eyes to see what might happen and sighed once more for inspiration.

"There was no mention of reclining," Ray said from somewhere else, from somewhere outside the car. "Only sitting."

Inez opened her eyes, somewhat reluctantly, for she had just been thinking of herself as a tiny child, when her mother would say, *Take a little nap now*—something like that, and she would close her eyes and take a little nap.

"Nevertheless, I'm awake," she said, looking up at Ray, who was looking in the partly open window above her feet.

"Don't close your eyes or you'll fall asleep."

"I won't. I know what I'm doing," Inez said hotly. Not knowing how she felt about things always made her irritable. Once, about five years ago, Ray and Inez had ridden a friend's motorcycle along the California coast, from San Diego to Mendocino. They sped along the highway, now and then smoking a little of the marijuana Ray carried in various film containers throughout his backpack. There were dead animals everywhere. Every few miles a dead deer or a coyote. "There's a lot of carnage on these highways," a gas station attendant told them, "but there's nothing anyone can do about it." When a chipmunk ran in front of the motorcycle and then, in confusion, back and forth again, Ray had zig-zagged the motorcycle across the road trying to avoid it. He had nearly driven the motorcycle off the highway, but they had not hit the chipmunk. Inez couldn't remember why she was thinking of this now. Then she thought it might be the fact that she had never driven the motorcycle. She had wanted to but she had been afraid; then they had nearly hit the chipmunk, the motorcycle was returned to its owner, and that was that: she hadn't driven the motorcycle. I should have driven that motorcycle, she thought.

Ray opened the car door, picked up her feet and, getting into the back seat beside her, placed them on his lap.

"You should talk more. You might be thinking anything, I wouldn't know," Ray said, looking at her feet. She thought there was love in the look he gave them. The thought made her sad.

"I used to like it when I'd wake up in the middle of the night," she began, "and I'd come into the living room and you'd be sitting in the big chair by the window making up a little song about me. You sang my name, 'Ineza, Ineza,' like that. I thought that was sweet and kind of sexy."

"I was listening to the Pixies," Ray said. "There was one song where I thought they were singing your name. It was like an echo—'Ineza, Ineza.' I played it back, but it was something else, it only sounded like Inez. I sang your name anyway."

Ray pulled off Inez's shoes. "Ineza, Ineza," he sang. He pulled gently at each of her toes. He rubbed the soles of her feet.

Inez closed her eyes. There was the smell of dirt on the air and the smell of the Mustang's leather seats. She felt as if something had opened up, there was a space waiting to be filled. She would move her lips and sounds would come out. *The love is all gone now,* she would say, gently. Ray would look at her and then he would get out of the car, open the gate, and walk up the overgrown lawn past the fish in his old baby bathtub. Stupid fish, he would say. Then he would walk up to his parents' house and go inside. She would sit in the back seat, hands folded neatly in her lap, waiting for someone to tell her what to do. She would say some words to herself, lines that she had heard somewhere, lines from a story. Then she would get out of the car, open the gate, and walk up the overgrown lawn to the fish in Ray's baby bathtub. Stupid fish, she would say, picking up the bath tub and carrying it back down to the brown Mustang. Then she would climb into the front seat of the Mustang and drive away down the dirt lane, laughing and shaking her head, because she was taking a dead fish to the sea and she had always wanted to say *to the sea* in that way, it sounded so lovely, like something would happen now.

She heard Ray's voice from somewhere above her feet, *Ineza, Ineza,* but she was already moving her lips, hurrying because something had opened up. *To the sea, to the sea,* she was saying to herself, and laughing.

Among the Headhunters of Formosa

Cammie McGovern

The story goes that when our great-grandmother went to study the natives on Formosa and a storm made landing her boat impossible, she swam ashore and walked up out of the surf: pale-skinned, fiery-haired, like the goddess of the sea the island inhabitants had, at that very moment, been praying to. The natives—wearing what, bones? leather swatches? (we fill in the gaps with our television imagination)—were bowled over by the sight of her, the first white woman they'd ever seen. They dropped to their knees and cried out in terror until finally the bravest among them, a young man of nineteen, maybe twenty, stepped forward and picked her up. A goddess's feet, she later learned, were never supposed to touch the ground.

Aunt Janet tells us this story. We blink in unison disbelief. We say in a single exhalation: "Oh, come on."

"It's true," Aunt Janet says, thin-lipped. We are hardly worth her time, though she gives us a lot of it. "She lived with them for two years and they worshipped her as a goddess all the while she was doing anthropological research on them."

We know this woman as the great-grandmother who went crazy later in life; who, for her last ten years, moved in with her son and daughter-in-law and made unmanageable demands about what she would eat. Nothing with milk. Nothing with onions. Toward the end, she drank a great deal and died, we have been told, with an alcoholic's face. Once, watching Ted Kennedy speak to the Senate, our mother pointed out his nose: red and bulbous, a map of veins. "That's like your great-grandmother Ann's," she said and for years that's how we thought of her: Ted Kennedy in a house dress. We have heard she was eccentric, that she spent her later years painting Georgia O'Keefe close-ups of flowers no one was interested in keeping after her death. We have heard she was difficult, but we have never heard this: she was an explorer.

"You're thinking of Margaret Mead," our Aunt Frannie says, opening the propane refrigerator. She is our favorite aunt, the youngest and the

prettiest. Because she has never had a child, she still looks like one: bikini-thin, so tiny her sundresses sometimes look empty.

Aunt Janet shoots her a look. They are sisters with seventeen years between them, at times a seemingly unbridgeable gap. "Margaret Mead came later and stole all of her ideas. There was even some talk of a plagiary lawsuit. Of the two of them, Grandmother Ann was really the pioneer."

We are five of us, cousins and sisters, all girls, and have spent every summer on this lake for as long as we can remember. There is no telephone, no electricity, no television, no plumbing. For emergencies a CB radio stays on in the corner. Desperate for something to do, we sometimes turn it up and listen for obscenities.

The aunts and uncles all live on different islands around the lake and canoe from one house to another at cocktail hour, carrying plates of hot hors d'oeuvres and pitchers of martinis. When we were younger we used to canoe too, pretending we were Sacajawea. Or else we'd swim, our legs clamped together like a family of girl seals on the lam from Sea World. Now we're older—thirteen to seventeen—and nobody can think of anything to do. In the morning we take out the motorboat and blow-dry our hair by going fast. After that, it's pretty much downhill.

This afternoon, it's raining and we're supposed to be making cookies, but instead we stir the batter and eat it. "What did Margaret Mead do again?" we ask. Though we only dimly remember her achievements, we remember her face from the *Important Woman in Science* film-strip we watched in school: doughy like a walrus, tiny glasses perched on pillow cheeks.

"She wrote *Coming of Age in Samoa,* which everyone now says is based on bad research," Aunt Frannie tells us, standing in front of the refrigerator.

"It *is,"* Aunt Janet snaps too quickly, as if her sister has touched a nerve.

"What's it about?" we ask, licking batter off our fingers.

Aunt Frannie turns around and whispers: "Sex and the pubescent Samoans." She wiggles her eyebrows, smiling, but Aunt Janet stops her.

"Never mind. It's complicated. You girls probably wouldn't understand."

That night we are left to wonder what we wouldn't understand. We are not children. We certainly know about sex and have since the brief but embarrassing period in our childhood when we obsessively drew naked people in profile: women with giant breasts, men with erections big as tennis ball cans. We learned of these things from a stack of dirty magazines we found near the dumpster behind the mainland supermarket. For three weeks, we went out at night, magazines tucked in our shirts, to study these pictures in the privacy of a night so dark we could hardly see

what we'd come to look at. Finally, disgusted with ourselves, we ceremoniously burned the magazines and began drawing the pictures everywhere we could, on napkins at lunch, with sticks in the sand. We made them cryptic, like hieroglyphs on a cave wall, so that no one accidentally looking on could see what we were doing. Over and over, we told each other, "You're gross," then reached for the slip of paper to add something on.

The next morning at 7:30, Aunt Janet stands before us wearing a skirted bathing suit and floral bathing cap. She has swum over from her island for morning exercise and will stay, dripping everywhere she stands, through breakfast. She does this every morning; at each dock on the lake, she leaves a pair of flip-flops. During the year, in her free time, she assembles a family tree that she brings with her every summer, rolled up, covered in plastic for the boat ride over. "There's another accomplished woman," she will say, unrolling her diagram, pointing to a name on a branch. She clings to these stories as an argument against her husband, who maintains her family is a collection of crackpots.

Now we ask what our great-grandmother did on the island. Old as this story is, it has captured our interest. Aunt Janet swims wearing goggles, carrying her glasses in a zip-loc baggy safety-pinned inside her bra cup. She takes them out now and wipes the lenses off with a piece of paper towel. She tells us our great-grandmother wrote a book. She squints to remember the title, then does: *Among the Headhunters of Formosa.*

Headhunters? We stare at her, dubious. "They ate *people?"*

She slides her glasses onto her face. "Certainly not. They killed people and kept their skulls, but they never ate them. Mostly they were vegetarian. Maybe a little fish." We nod though we can't imagine being a vegetarian, not eating a burger every once in a while. "They used the skulls as part of a ritual to prove manhood. To get a bride the man had to first get a skull."

"Huh," we say. "Was it published?" We assume it wasn't. Our Uncle John has spent his life writing one novel after another that never gets published and now has become so eccentric he refuses to double space or use a computer. His manuscripts, heavy with white-out, seem to come whizzing back from publishers the same week he sends them.

"Oh sure it was published. Margaret Mead reviewed it for the *Anthropology News* and loved it. They say it gave her the idea to go to Samoa."

We look at each other. "No way."

"The review said, and I quote, 'Clearly Ann Phillips is onto something here.' "

The islands around here are all trees and rocks. There is no place flat enough to lie out so we take turns on the picnic table, the benches, and

the hammock nearby. We close our eyes to the sun while sweat between our legs makes some of us wonder if we've started our period. If we open our mouths, no-see-'em bugs fly in, so instead of saying anything, we lie quietly and picture ourselves rising up out of the surf, greeting a tribal wall of strange men and women, wearing what we still can't picture though we try: saris? sarongs? We try to picture what must have happened: our great-grandmother swimming ashore, meeting one man brave enough to step forward. Did they lock eyes with one another? Did they speak? Our breath grabs at the thought. How could she not have fallen in love? A man steps away from a wall of his tribesmen to either kill her or do something as tender as pick her up (here we imagine him carrying her like a bride across a threshold), and what else can she do? We picture him tan, muscles sinewed from crouching by rivers to grab fish.

In the afternoon, Aunt Frannie opens an aluminum folding chair near us and sits down with a spiral notebook and pen in her lap. She is a poet and has written like this for as long as we can remember—longhand in notebooks like we use at school. Years ago we used to find scraps of her writing crumpled up in the garbage, and we would carry them home with us, copy them into a journal and after a while, pretend we'd written them ourselves. Eventually we showed them to friends who told us we were unbelievably good, that we should submit to *Seventeen.*

Though she is our favorite aunt, conversation with her is never exactly easy. She wanders from topic to topic, alights on declarations she makes then retreats from. "When I was your age, I loved to set *fires,"* she will say and then think for a moment. "Wait. No I didn't." At times, she has been unexpectedly candid. "When I was eighteen I slept with every boy under the sun. Pimples, B.O., I didn't care," she told us once, flipping through one of our magazines and stopping on a quiz titled, "Should you kiss on the first date?" According to our parents, we are supposed to worry about her, feel sorry for her, be concerned about her future which has always looked to them like a grim and lonely struggle. We aren't supposed to want to be her, but we do. We always have.

Now, because it's on our mind, we ask if she's ever read her grandmother's book.

She looks up from her notepad. "What book?" she says.

We tell her and she shakes her head. "I've never heard of it."

We tell her the most interesting part: that Margaret Mead reviewed it before she went to Samoa and probably stole all her ideas. As beginning plagiarists ourselves, we love the idea that famous people have done it.

Aunt Frannie narrows her eyes at something in the distance. "Isn't that strange? Why wouldn't anyone tell me my grandmother wrote a book?"

We know she probably *has* been told, that her memory has been

affected by her troubled years which are often mentioned by the others but not by her. We know only a few of the specifics: that she was pregnant once as a teenager, that she left college as a sophomore and lived for a year and a half in France, where she experimented with heroin. We know that she has been hospitalized twice for reasons that weren't physical but now she is better; she writes diligently and wins prizes her siblings talk about but have a hard time remembering the names of. She has even published a chapbook so slender the title—*Green My Heart and White the Moon*—doesn't fit on the spine.

"It probably wasn't that much of a book," we finally say to reassure her, a little sorry we brought it up. How could it have been, no one's seen a copy.

"Still," she says softly, "Margaret Mead must have liked it."

On Saturday we get a new idea. We can pretend we are our great-grandmother living like natives among an island population, studying the habits, recording the interactions, making anthropological observations. We've all wanted to be writers since we read *Harriet the Spy* and for years we have kept journals detailing the minutia of our social lives at school. Now we agree this will be different, based on science. We will look at gender dynamics, socializing rituals and pubescence in Vermont. We will start with ourselves, we decide, and Ginny, the oldest, a year away from college, begins. "I think of myself as the group leader figure. I mean no offense, but it's true." Ginny is loud and overweight, but claims she's only fat in the summer. ("I lose it all when I go home," she tells us. "I only eat here because there's nothing else to do.") She seems to believe anthropology is about labels. She opens her blank notebook and sharpens her pencil. "Moira is the pretty one."

We don't argue with this. Moira has the same red hair as our great-grandmother. She is fair-skinned, freckled in the summer. For the rest of the year, she lives in Temperance, Ohio. At the start of every summer, her parents make jokes as they pour themselves drinks. "Too long in Temperance," they say and tilt their glasses back.

Moira is shy and embarrassed easily. "No I'm not," she says now, pinkening.

"Oh shut up," Ginny answers, studying the notebook where she has drawn a pyramid, written her own name at the top and Moira's underneath. She thinks for a minute. We each wait in silent expectancy for where we lie on Ginny's pyramid. "The rest of you are followers," she finally decides and writes it all down. Somehow, we don't mind. In part, it gives us the anonymity to watch, unobserved; in part, it is simply true.

We begin canoeing from one island to another, studying behavior through Uncle Leonard's binoculars. "I think it's interesting that the

women always paint whatever the men have just built," Moira says. For the men, every day on the lake is a new construction project. The houses were finished a long time ago and now it's the amenities: a storage shed for life-preservers, a holder for canoe paddles. Moira is right, we marvel, men build and women paint. We start to wonder. We think of what this says about substance versus surface.

This summer, the women have turned their efforts to unusual gardening: feathery decorative grasses rest like dropped pompons around the houses, tiny copper-wired bonsai trees sit in each windowsill. The grasses are a whim, the bonsai an obsession. They have wired these shrunken trees to look like they are growing in the wake of a gale force wind, their backs snapped, their trunks curved. To re-wire a tree against its natural growth pattern can take up to six hours of an afternoon. They do it with special scissors, a soldering gun and the fierce concentration of surgeons. In our notes we can't help but pass judgment: "What a waste of time this bonsai fad is. In the end, they all look plastic anyway."

By mid-afternoon, evidence of wasted female talent can be found everywhere we look: Aunt Lelia hooks a yarn throw-rug in the pattern of a sailboat; Grandma Josephine makes hotpads out of bottle corks; Aunt Sophia needlepoints a "Bless this Mess" sampler. It feels as if we are surrounded by women shrinking their minds with arts and crafts projects.

At night we go over and watch Aunt Frannie, who lives by herself at the farthest end of the lake. She is an infrequent attendee at cocktail hour, usually a no-show at the clam bake dinners. What she does at night has always been a mystery, but now, in the name of our research, we watch as she fixes her dinner: cream cheese spread across Harvest Crisp crackers. Her notebook is open, a pen in her hand. As she eats and writes, we flash on the possibility that this is what our great-grandmother looked like living in her hut, writing her book in between visits from her tribal lover.

At night we start dreaming in scenes that overlap. We are living on an island—a dark, fairy-tale forest beside a lake. We are five Gretels waiting to be rescued, eating our house, cookie by cookie. The light is bad, the sky a bruised blue and purple and we are silent, afraid of being caught in the act of doing nothing. We listen for anything—footsteps, birdcalls, the watery gulp of fish hitting the water's surface. Then the glass top of the water breaks and eddies into a drainsuck, as if someone has pulled the plug on the lake, but instead of dropping lower, the water rises up. In a foamy white wave, a woman appears, her hair a blaze of flames, her colourless dress inexplicably dry. She sees us instantly, stares right at us. "What are you *doing?"* she says, her fists clenched tight.

As in all our dreams, we are voiceless. "Nothing," we mouth, hoping

she understands. We mean to do something. We're trying.

Suddenly she mutates into human proportion. Her hair becomes hair, wavy like our own. Ankle-high in water, she walks herself out, boots and hem drenched, so that she has to stop and squeeze her skirt out. "Ahoy," she shouts, holding her hand up, like a special guest star on "Gilligan's Island."

The scene dissolves into another: we are in a boat with her, travelling at great speed, faster than we go to blow-dry our hair, so fast the front of the boat lifts and slaps the water over and over. This is a scary way to travel; we know from experience the smallest misjudgement could send us all into the lake. It is understood that she is taking us to Formosa and we prepare ourselves privately for what we are about to see—women with large brown breasts, naked men wearing necklaces. We are nervous and excited, trying to think of what we will say, but when we arrive, there is no one on the shore to greet us, only a wall of unexpected heat and a jungle buzz of insects coming from the forest. Then, a light and a flash. Tree branches move, a twig snaps and we know we are being watched from the woods. We stand for a long time, taking it all in until we understand: we are the spectacle, not them. And even though this is a dream where anything might happen, nothing does. We put on no show. We stand in the sand and do nothing at all.

The next day, over corn ears we must husk, we ask Aunt Janet how long Grandmother Ann lived on Formosa. She squints to remember. "Something less than two years, I believe. She got sick and had to be taken back to Japan."

Sick, our eyes widen. Could she have been pregnant? We don't dare ask. Could we be the third generation of a Formosan headhunter?

"I'm not sure what was wrong," Aunt Janet says. "She was in a weakened state and she met a man there, an American missionary doctor, who brought her home and married her."

"Married her?" We'd forgotten, of course, that we had a great-grandfather. "What happened to him?"

"Not much. They moved to Atlanta, Georgia where she was very unhappy and eventually...what? I suppose he finally died."

Though she doesn't say it specifically, the implication is obvious: he was the problem, he was the reason she became so odd. Before we can ask any more, Aunt Lelia walks up with her half-finished yarn rug and plastic shopping bag of yarn pieces and the subject turns to the adults' new topic this week: Aunt Frannie's boyfriend. Though Aunt Frannie never talks about him, everyone else does. His name is Peter and he works as an independent contractor remodeling kitchens, specializing in cupboards. Aunt Frannie met him in the contemporary poetry section of

a Boston bookstore esoteric enough to carry her own thin book. At the end of their conversation when he asked how she spelled her name, she pulled it off the shelf and showed him exactly. He bought the store's only copy and asked her to sign it which she did, including her telephone number, a detail we all loved. Now Aunt Lelia tells us he's coming this weekend for the Fourth of July.

"Really?" we say, suddenly nervous. Outsiders so rarely visit, we have to worry what they will think. It is one thing to look at ourselves through binoculars, and quite another to imagine how a stranger might see us. Aunt Janet hardly reacts, but Aunt Lelia seems to be hooking at a new speed, as if she needs to finish this rug to be ready for the visit.

Over the next five days, an anxious flurry of preparation anticipates his arrival. Three parties are planned; food assignments are doled out. We are given chores, told to whitewash garden stones in time for the weekend. We begin to understand how a group of island inhabitants could greet the spectral vision of an outsider and mistake her for a goddess. We imagine what he will look like and, without meaning to, make him the same tribesman we have given our great-grandmother: skin the colour of earth, of syrup over pancakes, dressed in patches of animal skin.

We see him first through binoculars from Uncle Leonard's porch, riding over in a boat. It takes awhile to focus; with only three binoculars, we double up and get one eyehole apiece, which is tricky but works if you hold still and press close. Right away we know he isn't what we pictured. He's small, fair-skinned and blond, wearing what looks like an outfit bought especially for this weekend: a flannel shirt still creased in the sleeves, a Banana Republic hunting vest that stands away from his body as if he is not so much wearing it as sitting inside of it.

That afternoon, through binoculars from a canoe, we watch as he and Aunt Frannie sit side by side on redwood deck chairs, speaking as shyly as two people on a first date. We bob up and down and wait forever for them to touch. They never do. She speaks softly, her head lowered, as if she is unsure of the story she is telling him. He slaps at insects and studies his hand for what he has killed.

At dinner the first night, he is still wearing his vest and smells of Skin So Soft as he shakes everyone's hand. He asks for a vodka tonic which, accidentally, two people make him. Aunt Frannie takes one and sits down in the corner. Instead of watching him move through the room, talking to the men about the construction of each house, about insulation and ventilation, we watch Aunt Frannie recede behind her drink. When they step outside to look at a gutter, the conversation shifts into two separate tangles: the men outside, the women in the kitchen. We sit alone in the living room, watching as the setting sun splinters through Aunt Frannie's

glass of vodka. We follow her eyes, to the place on the floor where the light through her drink has made a spectrum.

At dinner, Peter talks about the houses he's built while Aunt Frannie drinks three glasses of wine. On the third, she dips her finger in the wine and runs it around the rim of her glass, trying to make a noise. We have rarely seen Aunt Frannie drink, though we have heard the other adults say she shouldn't, that she can't handle it. During dinner, she says very little but touches Peter often—his shoulder to whisper something, his hand to borrow his knife. Every time she does, we look at each other. We think of our great-grandmother and the sad surrender she made when she married her doctor, the beginning of her unhappiness. Without saying anything, we are each thinking the same thing: we must do something; we must save her from this.

After dinner, on the sofa, Aunt Frannie brings her feet up beneath her, folds them under her unflattering corduroy dress, and closes her eyes. While the others talk, we watch as she sleeps, sitting upright. We try to imagine what she sees with her eyes closed.

Later we watch from the darkened porch as Peter carries her out to the canoe they've brought over. He holds her like a prize while she curls her face into his chest and presses one fist, flat like an infant's, against his shirt. We understand this: the thrill that comes in being lifted off your feet is directly proportional to your inability to walk. We watch as he drops life preservers one by one along the bottom of the boat. He moves gently, careful not to wake her, and when he is finished, he lowers her slowly into the darkness of the boat, so that from where we stand, she seems to disappear.

The next morning, three of us wake up with our period in our underpants. Though the logistics here are awkward—without a flush toilet, we must swaddle tampons in toilet paper and bury these cocoons in bags of trash—we are excited by the coincidence and pull out our notebook to make an entry. Ginny, who hasn't started her period this morning, adds an analysis. "What can be the evolutionary purpose to simultaneous menstruation? So that men home from a hunt can impregnate everyone at once?" We read this, get mad, and tell her to cross it out. "What?" she says. "It's a theory. Please." She wants to take this away from us, to make it nothing, but we know it's not. We know somewhere in the red vines of our wombs lies the secret our great-grandmother found in the jungle. It is the irrefutable link between ourselves and our past and so, later, we soften. We wonder if maybe Ginny is right. Maybe our periods synchronize because we once lived on islands men only visited.

After breakfast, we take two canoes and head over to Aunt Frannie's with the ruse that we are inviting them to go water-skiing. Of course with

our periods, we won't wear bathing suits or water-ski ourselves. We'll sit in the boat with our legs crossed which is fine because we can't water-ski anyway and that's not what we're going for. Our plan isn't clear yet—only to get Aunt Frannie alone long enough to talk her out of marrying this man who, so much like our other uncles, will make her exactly like our other aunts.

After all this stasis, having a mission feels good. We paddle quickly and clamour out of our boats making more noise than we need to. If we are interrupting something, we think, fine, let's interrupt it. "Aunt Frannie?" we sing-song through a window, making our voices sound young and full of innocence. "Aunt Frannie, are you home?"

The screen door opens and Peter steps out wearing a yellow t-shirt and green shorts. In a single day, his pale legs have burned pink, striped white by sun block.

"Hello girls," he says softly. "Your Aunt Frannie's not awake yet." He looks uncomfortable, but seems, if anything, grateful for our company. He asks if we would like to come in anyway.

We follow him inside and look toward the bedroom. It is almost eleven o'clock in a place where everyone is up by seven. *Is she sick?* we want to ask, but don't. He gestures toward the sofa for us to sit down, which we do, and asks if we would like some orange juice and doughnuts. We nod okay and watch as he lines five glasses up on the counter. As he pours the juice, he bends down to make sure each glass is even, a scientist of fairness. "Here you are," he says, carrying the glasses over to us two at a time.

The doughnuts are a box of Hostess assorted: crumb, sugar, chocolate-covered. He arranges them in a pretty circle of alternating types and presents them with a stack of napkins like we used to do at the tea parties we threw for our stuffed animals. When he finally sits down, we see his pink and white legs are covered with bug bites. We each lean forward, take a doughnut and a napkin and sit back again, unsure what to say.

He tells us it is nice to meet us finally, how he's heard so much about us from our aunt.

We nod. He is trying so hard, we are suddenly filled with an urge to have him like us. "Have you heard about our great-grandmother?" Ginny says. "Did Aunt Frannie tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"She used to be famous. Sort of." Our voices overlap as Ginny bends forward and takes another doughnut. "She went crazy and drank too much. She wouldn't eat anything. No milk. No onions. She tried to be a painter, but she wasn't any *good.*" We tell him about her nose, her Ted Kennedy face, and, too late, we realize we've told the story wrong, that

we started with the end. Because we are scared of him, we have led with our weakness. If we aren't careful we'll be telling him everything, showing him our notebook, letting him see that the women in our family do nothing now but bonsai and batik. We start again, slowly this time.

"Of course before that," we say, "she was bigger than Margaret Mead."

We have never told a story like this to a man before. We need to go carefully. We tell him how she arrived, in the arms of a headhunter. We fill in the gaps with everything we've imagined. Soon after they became lovers. At night, he would bring her fish that they scaled and cooked before they went to bed. Because she was considered a goddess, nobody minded and it wasn't a scandal. But then she got pregnant and of course they couldn't get married. To get married you had to kill someone and give the bride the skull and she wasn't interested in that.

He nods and sips his coffee.

"So she left and went to Japan where she had the baby and the doctor who delivered it talked her into marrying him and moving to Atlanta where she finished her book. But when it was published, she wasn't allowed to do interviews or a book tour, so the only people who read it were Margaret Mead and a few others."

Ginny, with a half a doughnut in each hand, goes on: "Actually, she knew Margaret Mead. They went to college together and for a little while they were lesbian lovers." We all turn and look at her. Peter raises his eyebrows—really?—and she goes on. "We've found some love letters, mostly from Margaret. Our great-grandmother was only experimenting bisexually, she wasn't in love, which was why Margaret got so mad and stole her ideas." Ginny takes a bite of doughnut, looks up and stops.

We follow her look to where Aunt Frannie stands in the doorway wearing her dress from last night, staring down at us. We drop our napkins and stand up. "Aunt Frannie," we say. "Are you all right?"

She shakes her head and says nothing. We wonder how long she was standing there listening. Peter goes to her side and slips an arm around her waist, so that her body falls into his. For a long time no one says anything, then finally, touching the mat of her tangled hair and looking down at the ground, Aunt Frannie says, "Shouldn't you girls be *doing* something?"

We leave in a flurry, so confused two of us are still holding our orange juice when we get to the boats. Because we are scared of going back, of piling embarrassment on top of embarrassment, we rinse the glasses out in the lake and leave them on the middle of the dock.

Later, they come to dinner, drink cranberry juice all night and say very little. Aunt Frannie looks at us and then seems to look through us, as if she is studying not our faces but our thoughts. Then when we move,

her eyes don't.

We understand from the others they are talking about marriage. Though the family has only known him two days, everyone is relieved; he is kind, they say. Not an artist, not a rocket scientist, but a decent man. We are led to believe that for Aunt Frannie this is a first.

To leave early, Peter tells everyone Frannie hasn't slept well the night before. We know there is something wrong but we aren't sure what it is. After they leave, we walk down to the point where there is a V of sandy beach to stand on. We learned many years ago that sounds travel over water farther than they do on land; with no wind it is possible to hear from the shore a conversation in a canoe. For a long time we stand there, listening to them row, measuring the silence, wondering what it means.

Finally, when we hear nothing more, we start to turn back and then stop. The air is surprisingly warm for night, thick and sweet with the smell of a wood fire. The bugs that are so dense in June have died away and we are alone. We stand for a long time. It's Moira who says it first, which surprises us because usually she's so shy about her body.

"Let's go swimming," she whispers and we watch as she draws her arm into her sleeve. Amazingly, in all the summers we've been here, we've never done this. Modesty runs through the family like a gene; we change in outhouses, hug our knees in bikinis. Now in the dim light of the moon, we are only shadow and skin as we slip out of our clothes. For a moment we hesitate in our bras and our underwear; the air feels like something we've never touched before. Then one by one, we reach around to unhook our bras. It is true that some of us wear a bra needlessly, less for support than for the fear than in an unguarded moment our nipples might show. Now they take the night chill and harden on the spot. Finally we drop our underpants to the ground and step free. We stand for a moment and then slip into the dark arms of the water, one by one, quiet as seals dropping off rocks. There we are alone. We spread and scissor our legs, to feel the water. We do the breaststroke and the sidestroke and then we belly-up to float. When we get brave enough, we let our heads drop back so that our ears are underwater, blocking out all sound, until we realize water is louder than air, a superconductor of noise. We can hear everything like this, the percussion of our organs: our hearts, our lungs, the blood in the capillaries moving through our eardrums.

When we get out, not long after, there isn't anything to say. We walk quietly to the attic room where, on nights like this when it is late and our parents have left without us, we all sleep together.

Later, what we think at first is a dream, isn't. We sleep in bunks, inches from each other, accustomed to the sounds of our own restlessness. We can sleep through conversations, through bathroom trips, even through

the sound of one of us crying, which is why it's strange that we all wake simultaneously to the silent presence of our Aunt Frannie in the room with us. Of everything we thought might happen, we never thought this: that she would come for us. For a long time, no one says anything. We pretend we're asleep so we can watch what she does, thrilled by the possibility that she is spying on us. Then she shines a flashlight in a circle at her feet. "Come on," she whispers. "I want to show you something."

There is no use pretending we aren't wide awake. She leaves so quickly, we have to hurry into sweatshirts over our nightgowns. Outside, the cold chill of the ground surprises our feet. Fear of stepping on a frog (as Moira once did) has kept us in shoes all these years. Now, making our way with our feet in the darkness is new to us but easily done. With our toes we feel for dirt and move ahead. Soon, we can hear her voice again and see a flash of light. She is asking if we're all right. "Fine!" we call out, our voices strangled by fear.

One by one, we climb in the rowboat and hug life preserver cushions for the chance of some warmth. We are thrilled by the strangeness of this, by the proximity of Aunt Frannie. For the first time, we wish we didn't have to share this moment with each other. "Move over," we snap. "Quit hogging."

"Is everyone settled?" Aunt Frannie asks. Her voice quiets us. If we all stay silent, we can each pretend we're alone with her.

She pushes the boat and hops in with a single movement so smooth only one foot gets wet. She lifts it out without a splash—only a pluck and a drip. We are used to watching the men push off, less artfully, with more heave. Now we can't see, but we can hear her delicacy. She rows for awhile without speaking, heading towards Hurricane Creek, the most interesting part of the lake—a swampy shoreless bay, where it is possible to feel like you are boating on land through shoulder-high grasses and trees ripped apart by violent storms. In the old days, when we looked harder for these things, we used to see a family of otters in this part of the lake. If you stayed in one spot long enough, sooner or later a dark head would pop up, scan the surface of the lake until it settled on you, then stare forever. As children, it felt like a romance of sorts, getting otters to watch us. We imagined becoming such good friends they showed us their houses. Now it is too dark to see them or anything else. We listen to the oars churn through the water, to the metallic squeak of the oarlocks, folded over our pillows, hugging our knees.

Aunt Frannie says nothing but begins to breathe heavily at the effort rowing five girls takes. Then she stops and we float uncertainly for a minute, unfold ourselves and squint into the darkness to determine where we are, which, even after all these years on this lake, we cannot do. We are seized by a fear that she has come all this way not to show us some-

thing, but because she is angry with us. She has brought us here to tell us that we made fools of ourselves, embarrassed everyone with our stories. We sit, sick with our own stupidity. We are light-years away from understanding what it means to be an adult or be in love. Between the five of us we have kissed eleven different boys, which means some of us have kissed four boys apiece and some of us, none. Finally we say, "We're sorry, Aunt Frannie for the things we told Peter—"

She shakes her head as if to tell us we shouldn't speak, that's not what we're here for. And so we wait—scared now in a way we've never been before—for what is about to happen, for Aunt Frannie to say something that will make us understand why all these years the adults have whispered when they mention her name. We wait for her to rip off her clothes, to take a suicide swan dive off the side of the boat, until finally, we've waited so long we wonder if we would follow her right into the water, let our nightgowns stretch behind us like sheets of white hair, pulling us away from safety and the boat, leading us like our dream to Formosa where this time we would push back the palm fronds and step into the jungle. Our hearts hammer at the idea. We would, we think. We really would.

But instead of doing anything we continue to float, rising and falling in our own boat's wake, staring above us at the starless sky. We know she won't dive. She is with Peter now, as good as engaged, which means the next time we see her will be at her wedding where, if we are lucky and still young enough, we will be flower girls, walking up the aisle, dropping soft rose petals, saying nothing. We can't help it: we want both to stop this and be part of it.

We also want to understand what she has brought us out here to see, but clouds have erased the moon and the stars and everything is darkness. We widen our eyes to make them adjust, but we know they never will. We will never see all of it.

Then it happens. Out of the darkness, there is movement, a noiseless stirring, then a buzz, and we realize hundreds of bats are circling around us, close enough to feel them with our hair. In past summers we have run inside screaming at the first zipper sound of a bat flying near us at dusk. Now we know more. We have learned in school they can't see us; we are shapes in their sonar, an answer to a sound we can't hear. We also know they will come closer if we hold still, so we do, making no sound, saying nothing, until we can hear the steady hum of their wings and can feel them surrounding us like the jungle, closing in. And then, one by one, we raise our hands, palms up to the sky, because we want to be scientists, thinkers in the face of what we don't understand, and doing this is our best chance of actually touching it.

Wonder Bread

Donald Anderson

In the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts were sculpted slices of bread, a leather valise, still lifes of pickup trucks and semis, and a canvas which faked a 4' x 8' panel of construction-grade plywood hammered to the wall. Across the gallery was a seated naked woman. *Red-Haired Woman, Green Velvet Chair* refocused your attention from the artist's technique—his *precision*—to her individual self. She was triumphantly and generously herself. Polyvinyl Truth.

Trace spied me at the plywood. She stood before her class and beside the naked woman. Even from where I stood, the nude sculpture appeared numbingly real. I checked the catalogue: Fig.129 John DeAndras. 1979. Cast vinyl, polychromed in oil, life-size. Private collection. New York.

I strained to hear Trace speak to her college students. *Except for the nude, what image pulls us all? What else would it be? bread? a porcelain tub? the Sphinx?* Then: *Sculpture occupies space in a way a human can't.* You can stare at art, Trace said. She touched a hand to her hair, which was short in a calculated way. I could picture Trace as a terrorist, clipped hair quick-dyed or slipped, slick as Teflon, into caps, nylons, wool masks.

When I saw Kent's Trace, I knew her. Another man's mistress, she was both more and less than I expected. She stood in a black sun dress. She seemed intentionally untanned, and, like the *Red-Haired Woman,* appeared as illusion as well as fact: a cranking up of special effects. I felt the urge to shift closer and stare. Which is why I'd been invited on this pilgrimage east: I, Stephen Mann, was to be Kent's witness. My friend, Kent, had chosen me.

There was about Trace, in this place, the unbelaboured dazzle of a master pencil sketch. As a drawing Trace might have been a Dürer. But knowing what I did about Kent and Trace, any kind of starchy pose struck as a thrilling ruse, a snare.

Kent was still outside, trying to park the rented car. He'd dropped me at the curb, convinced that someone would free a meter. "I'm going in," I said. I pointed at an attended parking advertising space for three bucks. "Put it there."

To my mind, Kent seemed too cheerful, too expectant in his turning

from his wife, June, to Trace. Kent seemed unscraped. The clear failure of my own marriage had undone me. Who was Kent to escape?

* * *

Before and throughout my marriage, my wife, so it turned out, had slept with other men, though the first time Anna and I made love came late. Six days before the wedding, we were finally in the sack, only to be interrupted by her landlord thumping on the door. Anna answered the door in my shirt. She told the landlord to stay put, then their voices lowered. I strained to hear them talk. Anna returned to the bedroom, dropped my shirt, stood by my side of her bed. *Do something,* she said. *It's cold.*

We lived in Montana; we lived in Utah; we moved to Omaha, Nebraska. We made Alexandra and Daniel—sister and brother—then lurched along. I was astonished to be so unhappy. At the end, Anna would refuse me in our bed. She would turn to me: *No*—ruffle her hand beneath the sheets—*but here, I can help you if you want.* Sometimes I told her yes.

After Anna moved out—taking baby Dan—my daughter and I soon moved to Colorado, from where I filed for divorce. Anna called from Omaha—she seemed amazed to have received the lawyer's notice. *You're a terribly selfish man. I doubt you can be cured.*

I'd moved to Colorado because a Boulder-based small press had accepted a batch of my work, and because, even in Nebraska, I felt I'd retreated too far east. I began work for Hewlett-Packard—technical writing—and waited for the birth of my book. My stories weren't published for months. Meantime, I wrote for Hewlett-Packard eight hours a day on a Hewlett-Packard computer. I wrote technical notes, instructions, warnings, Hewlett-Packard ads: "Computers for Life." At night I listened to a jazz station out of Denver. That year, I read all Alexandra's fourth-grade texts: her science, math, history, English—the works.

Colorado had seemed as good a spot to restart as most. When I'd gotten the contract for the book, I dug out a map, looked for Boulder. What do you do with a town that seems named as a western version of Plymouth Rock? I said the name of the state out loud: C-O-L-O-R-A-D-O. Then: *Denver, Golden, Aurora, Rush, Sangre de Cristo, Divide, Rifle, Cope, Fairplay, Last Chance, Loveland.*

"We're moving, Alex. To where we belong. To Colorado Springs. The Rockies. Someplace solid."

Alexandra pointed out—something I'd read in her books—that the earth's surface (its crust, its peaks) shifted a full six feet, like oceans, every day.

"Do I care if mountains rise or fall if I don't see them do it?"

"Doesn't mean they don't, Steve," said Alex, using my name to

make her point.

"Well, now, Alex," I said, "there you are."

In Montana, as a child, I'd seen the sun rise and set with respect to eternal peaks. Colorado Springs, it turned out, had mountains only to the west.

When my stories were finally published, the printing run was small. I'd written about Mormons, miners, prizefighters, strikers, losers, dreamers, bums. If the stories were linked by idea, it was not that the West had been won, but that the rush to ruin is as ancient as it is abiding, and as common in Promised Lands as any.

My book sold to libraries with review copies to selected professors. Kent, a professor who read the book, wrote to me from across town to offer dinner then, later, arranged a job for me at his college. I quit Hewlett-Packard. Alex began sixth grade.

Kent and I were fast friends. And I liked June, the wife of twenty-five years he would leave for Trace. Kent's break from June hardly qualified as a surprise. Kent and June weren't ones to stage themselves just in private. I was in their home the night Kent announced to June his need for Trace: THE LEAVING.

FADE IN:
INTERIOR—NIGHT

The camera pans KENT and JUNE's living room. The colour of the room and its furniture (modern) is glossy white, though the room can hardly be described as neutral. The floor, for instance, so shiny it looks wet, is enamel black. There is good art on the walls. There are vases, wire and metal sculpture, rugs, bookcases (crammed), books scattered about—above all, it is a house where books are read. The room is lighted by torchiere lamps. The light of each lamp is bright, but local—thus, the room appears both over and underlit. In the corners are stereo speakers the size and height of dwarfs.

The camera slows past colour photographs of Kent and June. In these photos, Kent and June are young. Kent stands on a country club porch, peacocky, in a summer suit. The breeze has mussed his hair, but everything else is picture-perfect—the shirt is hard-starched, the shoes beam-white, the necktie is snug at the collar.

June stands on grass. The sweater she wears in her photo is drawn across her chest as she draws a bow, arrow aimed at a target outside the frame. Her hair has been tied back. From the stretch of the sweater and tendons in her neck, you feel the strain of the bowstring pull for June. A different view

of the clubhouse rises behind June, though the building here is obscured by flowering hedges, small trees. June, at once, blooms and looks as though she could hold the bowstring taut forever.

The camera arrests at the glass-topped dining table. The glass top is a smoky gray. The china, like the floor, honest black. The camera next pans the table: the hands, fingers, wrists, watches, rings, June's black-red nails, the half-eaten food, the bread, the plates, the glasses, the wine. Dinner sounds are amplified as if for radio, not film (the scrape of cutlery, the slop of drink, the strike and flare of matches, the rub of soles, the overmiked conversation). A chrome light is suspended above the table, its light dimmer than the other lamps. Thus, faces are backlit, accenting shadowed close-ups and the smoke of cigarettes. The music, which fades, is jazz—Oscar Petersen, say, Stan Getz.

JUNE: *(Tilts her head toward me for a light for her cigarette. She keeps one eye on Kent, leans back, makes her smoking a production.)* Kent has given his heart to Trace. *(To include me)* Do you know Trace?

KENT: *(Also smoking, stubs his cigarette, then lifts and drains his glass.)* Most of us confine our assaults to dreams. My Junie works daytime too. Darling, you must be exhausted from your slaughters. The strain would accumulate, I'd think. How do you recover your strength?

JUNE: *(To me, but gazing at Kent)* Look at him. He's oxidized with love. *(To me, looking at me)* Do you know Trace? *(To Kent)* Would I be interested in your ruin? We're calling it slaughter now, are we?

KENT: *(Lighting a new cigarette with a table candle, spills hot wax onto his wrist. He flinches, then intentionally burns himself again. June watches. Kent toasts June with a puff from his cigarette.)* You underrate yourself. You are not an unrealised assassin.

JUNE: *(Raises her glass.)* God bless Trace. God bless her disposable self. Does she know?

KENT: *(To me, to involve me)* Our bed has been dead for years. *(To June)* If anyone wishes to think otherwise, that's their affair.

JUNE: Couldn't our poor sex life, at least, have been spared your grand ambitions? *(Then, rallying)* God bless this Trace. Does she know?

KENT: This dialogue *(He consults his watch.)* took but seconds to

speak, but rather a long part of my life to live. *(To June, directly)* Though it's not your fault. Dear June, you can't be blamed. Your need to kill is inscribed in every cell.

Kent sails into a lecture about genetics as the theory has applied to June. June squirms in her chair—a bored, naughty student with unmournfully large breasts. At one point, June reaches over, empties the remainder of a wine bottle into Kent's glass, then gestures for Kent to drink. Kent stands, hoists the glass, drinks it off like an old Greek fisherman, flourishes the emptied glass, sits down. He then stands back up with the glass, throws it.

* * *

Anna and I lacked such flair. We might have found port in such skills, but if we lacked exceptional performance, we didn't lack for a set: our final location Nebraska, the near exact centre of the contiguous United States. (Fold a map of the US into fourths, then open. The cross hairs are in Nebraska.)

Anna hated Omaha, said the city smelled. Omaha is (Council Bluffs with its porn shops just across the once unbridged Missouri) a city of railroads, insurance, national defence, cows, silage, stockyards, slaughter-houses, and rendering plants where what's left of a cow is altered into wax, chicken food, bags of stuff for your grass.

I wasn't nuts about Omaha myself, but it was and is, each year, the site of the College Baseball World Series, and who can defame fully a city which hosts annually a baseball world series? The Omaha city fathers supported programs of *Peace through Strength,* baseball, and hale commerce. To put it otherwise: in Omaha people had jobs, religion, haircuts, steak, corn, trucks, plugged hearts, dead cows, investment or term insurance, undressed women for the price of a drive across the Mighty Mo, the Air Force—nuclear protection and steady employment from Uncle Sam—and, once a year, a uniting community sport.

During the years we lived in Omaha, I escorted Anna to the College Baseball World Series, never missing a final game. I bought box seats a year in advance. But Anna hated Omaha, sang her refrain from the moment we first motored across the city limits. She cranked down the car's front window, sucked a deep whiff of the life and death of cows on a southerly summer breeze: "Jeezo. This city could ruin love."

We stayed in Omaha because Anna found work in a store called Queen's and because I snagged enough tuition assistance to finish grad school. Creighton University had a basketball reputation and mandatory class attendance—a time-proved Catholic tradition. I went to class mornings, studied in the afternoons. Nights and weekends for the next two years, I worked in the Omaha stockyards where I met Spec Huff

(a character Kent was to say any writer would've loved to have had at hand), my best Omaha pal, and probably my wife's lover.

When my daughter and I left for Colorado, the last thing Anna parked on me was: *I also had Huff.* Spec had graduated (high honours) and was gone (I had the notion out west, where, I presumed, he was practising physics). Spec fancied himself a prophet, though not one to warn the world so much against bombs as, more sensibly, against goons *with* bombs: Enlightened Science. He had organized protests outside the gates of Headquarters Strategic Air Command, but the local media, in tight and uptight with the local military-industrial complex, had not bothered to notice.

What I recognise now—should have recognised before and repeated to myself like a parrot—is that if Anna and Spec, in fact, bewoggled each other breathless, then this was business between *them,* not business with *me.* How many years had it taken to chart this response? Meantime, the character Spec had not appeared, praised or damned, in any of my published stories. Nor, despite Kent's direct suggestions, was Spec present in any draft. I will tell you, though, some facts about Spec. Spec and I shared, for instance, twenty-seven months in the Omaha stockyards, slopping shit.

Once, finishing late, and sitting in the locker room to rest, Spec and I stood aside for the passage of a winding row of Hasidic Jews. The rabbis, uncomfortably dressed for the heat of an Omaha August, changed from their shoes into rubber boots and switched to hard hats. The rabbis then rose as a group, headed out. Spec pinched my arm. We rose, covered, too, the frail bowl of our skulls with what seemed the frailer white moulded plastic, and in that death house—safety on our heads, and in slogans above our lockers—followed the Jews.

As a rule, cows at the yards were stunned by a shot from a pneumatic gun after which they were hung and bled, disembowelled, skinned. Kosher cows were strung up wide awake, their principal arteries opened perpendicularly to the axis of their necks, followed by inspection of their shocked cooling hearts and lungs. This patterned slaughter was at the hand of only a handful of authorized Jews.

Spec and I were asked to leave. One of the rabbis, younger than the rest, stepped between Spec and me, rested his arms like a father about us. He craned toward the disciplined butchers. "For us this is prayer," he said, estimating us from a vantage of baggy eyes and rigid brow. What should have been a young face seemed ancient, unbewildered, and—I couldn't decide—iron-hearted? sad?

The death of a clear-headed cow a prayer? What is the message in that? That anything can be transformed and honoured, converted to Truth? The rabbi, as I say, was young, but he made me feel younger.

Spec and I turned from the wide-eyed dying and dead. We didn't bother the Jews again.

Although his peer, Spec treated me like a student. There were scientific things he thought I should know. For Spec, physics reigned supreme, and included, along with, say, the study of gravity or the curve of space, why chopping onions makes you cry. It was Spec's habit to educate me while we worked. His first lecture had been the physics which explained my pitchfork, an instrument Spec admired as evidence of applied science among early common people of divergent cultures. Spec preached that the pitchfork, in unadorned purity, had been present in civilization for as long as bread.

I asked Spec about black holes, because if he were going to teach me something, it might as well, I thought, be something I wanted to know. But Spec didn't answer my questions. He shut his eyes. Next night, Spec brought me a children's book, an oversize book with large pictures and print, and punchy sentences like *Well, what about black holes? Are they holes? Are they black? Let's look.* "Here," he said, thrusting the book at me. I took the book to understand black holes, but how to understand a force so transcendent even light is refused escape?

One night—a night I want to tell you about—Spec hauled into the yards in his battered pickup, hammering the horn. He parked, then strode across the lot brandishing a golf club. Spec mounted the docks, set up with the club—a two-iron—took a healthy swing. We watched the perfect flight of an imaginary ball Spec then announced he could drop a cow with a single blow. That broke the spell. We said, "You bet."

Spec dug in his pockets for chalk, scratched a formula on the cement—equations to transliterate his height, arm length and strength, club-head weight, speed, torques, the shift of arcs and planes. Spec stared at his math, then at us. But what he saw were not faces inspired by theory. One of the crew hefted Spec's club, pronounced it lighter than a good wood bat. The crew began to hoot. Spec raised his voice. His formula proved, he claimed, an actual ton of focused force. "One ton—do you hear?—of force."

We did the only thing we could: we collared a cow. Spec gazed around, then looked at me, then said, "Fine," then swung his club, loosening up. We rigged flooring the level of the heifer's head which we clamped between a couple of metal grates. We hobbled the cow, then lifted Spec to the makeshift floor. We'd done a good job. The heifer couldn't move, and, confused, rolled her eyes. Someone said the cow was just looking for food; someone said, no, for God. The cow's display of dumb bewilderment made my face go numb as if someone had popped a switch. I felt stupidly cruel, but did nothing to halt what was now rolling full-steam.

Spec looked at me. What did he expect? Would he have been satisfied with chalking his formula on the wall? Then why had he brandished the club? Why had he brought it in? He'd raised the long iron above his head like a sword or wand—as if he were, what? a wizard? a saint? the Prince of Dung? Spec lined up his club on the heifer's ear. For the third and last time, he shot me a look. The crew, without me now, hooted louder. Spec settled on his heels, exhaled, drew back the club. In split seconds—head anchored, left arm rod-straight, weight careening right to left—Spec had bent his club, fractured his wrist, and struck dead a Hereford the size of a Japanese truck.

The cow dropped, pulling with her the grates and the flooring. Spec, confoundingly athletic (few in that crowd would have thought of golf as a sport) leaped free of the heap, tumbling when he hit the slop off-balance, cradling, protecting the wrist. He ended his roll on his feet, faced his work. Then a boss showed up. Except for Spec, we tried to scatter, but the boss shouted us back. We stood before him in a ragged row. Spec leaned against the docks. The boss swung from Spec to us, swore at us, spat, booted the cow, docked us an hour's pay, then stood while we—Spec didn't budge—hoisted the carcass to the blunt tines of a yellow forklift. We shambled back to our pens. The boss, from the wheel of the forklift, presided over this retreat, shifting his cigar, unlit in his mouth, and spitting. Spec outwaited the boss—who finally fired off with the cow and the forklift—then drove himself, manhandling his truck one-handed, to the Medical Centre at Creighton U.

That image of Spec—the club, the cow—is an image that sticks. I can be talking to anyone, anywhere, and I'll suddenly see the cow, hear the two-iron slamming home. The cow's eyes roll back. The film then rolls reverse and forward, reverse and forward, the cow's legs unfolding and folding.

I felt some guilt about Spec's white-casted wrist, so I invited him to the house to watch Husker football on TV. I felt a sort of relief when Anna drew hearts and wrote our names in blood-red on Spec's cast. I kept fetching beer. We yelled for Nebraska to send the Sooners packing. We were happy. Spec pointed out that of a Saturday afternoon, Husker Stadium in Lincoln became the third largest city in the state. During the half-time on TV, Spec sobbed for having killed the cow. I pointed out, I thought sensibly, that the cow had been doomed. I reminded Spec of where we worked. "It's a slaughterhouse," I said. Spec refused the thought. In *cow* time and by *cow* logic Spec argued, we had robbed a creature of days of cow food and breath. *"We?"* I said.

"You have to think about it like a cow," Spec said. When we'd drunk half a case, I conceded. Anna drove Spec's pickup to the 7-Eleven to get more beer. We kept the TV going but started a board game which ended

when I challenged Anna on a move; she tossed the board then left the house. I circled the floor on my knees, gathered the lettered squares.

* * *

The first time I was invited to Kent's and June's, June tossed a Scrabble board, then her drink, at Kent, then screeched off in her car. Kent and I watched her go, the convertible top lowered. Kent and I tramped back through the snow to the house, rubbing our arms. Inside, we poured drinks, cleaned up the game, searched for a lost square with the letter S. Lifting rugs, we treated the room in quadrants, scanned for a bump on the painted floor. We looked again. Buffaloed, we gave up. I said goodbye, drove home, thought of Spec—a name which started itself with S, stopped for beer, bought Stroh's, sped home, got drunk to Sinatra. Sinatra at the Sands. Was the mistake of my life, I wondered that night—blind-drunk—not to have thought to have gambled in Las Vegas with Spec, not to have taken his mind to those tables?

Though when I think of Spec now—after sixteen years—I don't see him in casinos, I hear him preaching physics to half-filled halls in the intermountain West, up and down the knuckled spine of the Rockies. I've kept Spec thin, buzzed his hair, dressed him in chinos and ironed shirts, given his voice the sound of a bell: *There are no bystanders in a nuclear war or a bankrupt marriage.* I don't work to keep Spec in my mind: he's there. Before Spec. After Spec. Before I knew Spec I had a wife; after he left, I didn't. In between, he and I pitched a few tons of shit, stiffed a cow, studied the universe, maybe shared a lay, slugged beer. I've kept friends for less.

* * *

I finished at Creighton. Armed with a Master of Arts in English, I searched for a job teaching college. I couldn't find work, so I went back to the stockyards, nights. Daytime, I wrote short stories.

For her part, Anna advanced to a job with an insurance corporation. Part of the deal was Health and Life for herself, and, so covered, she investigated, famously stern is my bet, other people's claims. In a matter of weeks, she moved out of our house with Daniel. Daniel had turned two. Just learning to talk, he bumped around, bounced off furniture like a ball; in those days, if you spoke to Dan, he'd bite you.

Anna moved out with Dan, the living room, the bedroom, and most of the stuff from the kitchen. In her note she wrote: *I took some things. You're the one with the college degree. Alex is at school. Call you.* I fed and bathed Alexandra—her room and rituals intact. Alex had wanted to know what was happening. I had no idea what to say to a kid with a second-grade education; I kissed her till she pushed me away, then I covered her with extra blankets. In the living room, Anna had left the mirror tile

she had glued to one wall. The effect of this wall was to enlarge and distort the room. To save money when we moved in, Anna had widely spaced the tiles. Now ransacked but for one lamp and the mirrors, the room seemed large and overlit.

I stooped, raised, bent from side to side. All of me was there, but Anna's mirror wall demanded sequence and position. I gazed at the image: an ear gone there, fingers here, an eye. I stared at myself, then removed my clothes to look. In time, I turned to my bare windows. I switched off the light. Anyone could have seen me from the street.

Anna had cleared the room. Why did I stand naked in its barrenness, like the thief? When the telephone rang, I jumped, then bent to the receiver. I felt ready to confess. But to what? It was Anna who spoke: "You there?" Her voice sweetened: *It's not as if we can't talk.*

* * *

How do you account for the difference between what it was you wanted when you married and what you arrange for yourself to get? I stood in a museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and stared at Kent's Trace. I'd not seen Anna in seven years. I counted it up, felt a slight panic, then took a good look at the art. It was not the type of art I was used to, but I felt drawn to the canvas painted to look like plywood hammered to the wall. It had fooled me until I got close. The painted plywood made me think of my dad: my father would have set the fake plywood's painted nails. As a kid, I was awed by my father setting nails, then masking the holes and sunk nail heads with putty.

From my father's nail set—its durable tip and crosshatched head—my attention transferred to Trace's legs. From a safe distance, I then returned my stare to *Red-Haired Woman,* the vinyl nude. Longer lasting than tin or bronze, this redhead would outlive me or Trace or anyone, but she'd do it without the pangs of doom, nostalgia, toil, alarm, fury, gesture, loss. I turned back to stare at Kent's Trace.

"You should meet her," Kent had said. "She's ferociously bright." For weeks, he wouldn't shut up. Finally, I asked if he'd mistaken confrontation and efficiency for intellect and knowledge, looks for beauty, pillage for response, and so on. But seeing Trace was, as Kent had suggested, a separate matter, another thing apart. From where I stood, Trace seemed in charge of herself and all about her: art and students, alive and dead.

"Have you seen her yet?" Kent asked, then looked past me to Trace.

"I found her." I pointed toward the class.

Kent checked his watch, checked Trace, who now was moving with her students. Kent said he'd found a meter. We turned, Kent and I, to *Wonder Bread*—six displays of sculpted sliced bread: carrara marble, 4 x 4 1/2 inches. Six slices of poked, balled, folded—*mutilated*—bread.

Everything you've ever done to Wonder Bread, or wanted to: in rock.

Kent said what was this? I pointed at a banner. "Realism since 1960, Kent." I had become, in seeing Trace, what? an avowed and expert critic? I asked Kent what *he* thought Realism was, if *not* this.

Kent said he didn't know, but it was not stone bread. That a motorcycle leaned against a door could be no one's serious notion of a still life. I asked what he would prefer? stiff birds? a board of rotting fruit? "You want rabbits, Kent? Dead hares?"

"Yes," he said, then started for the restroom.

I felt condemned to a messier world than Kent's. "In the world of still," I shouted at his back, "there is no difference between a Buick and a grape." I felt half in love with Trace.

"Oh, of course there is," Kent said, without raising his voice or turning round. There was a bar of sweat where the back of Kent's shirt met his belt and slacks. Kent wore long-sleeved shirts year-round. Kent's hair, too, was damp. How far away had he parked the car? He'd found a meter all right—probably a meter with time, blocks away. Kent reached the stairs. I watched his wet head sink.

Kent was still gone when Trace joined me at the bread, one of her students following to ask should her reaction to the exhibition be technical or thematic. Trace nodded at the bread. I nodded at the bread. Trace waved the student off. "Make a choice," she said to the student, a pretty girl who could have used a bath. I wanted to offer the girl a good used nail set and unused soap: *tools for living.* The child beamed Trace a nasty look, then turned. Jealous as a daughter, she stamped off.

I looked back at Trace, a woman who surely would have understood the gift of setting the head of a nail in wood below the surface. At that moment, I wasn't certain I could teach college kids again. Who can converse with beings who can't read without the honk of TV noise or rock? What sort of sounds would these children need to make love? Whatever happened to the music of night-long soaking rain? unmolested radio beams from Mars? wind in grass—natural sounds of truce and promise? I looked at Trace, convinced I could speak to no one but grown, educated, and employed adults. I started to say this when Kent shouted from the stairs.

Kent kissed Trace, then complained about the sculpted bread. I said Trace and I had met. I asked Kent would he approve of six diminutive nudes which, like the glassed-in bread, had been variously offended and displayed? I turned to the shabby leather valise which we found to be constructed—including its rubbed brass corners—of high-fired ceramic clay. "Wonderful," said Trace.

On the wall were canvases of the pickups and semis: painted portraits so precise they looked like photos. One of the pickups could have

passed for a replica of Spec's, the exact rust and dents. Part of me wanted to see old Spec in the painting too, slouched, say, in the background against the barn's wood sides or swinging an iron. Then a picture of Anna and Spec unclothed on a bed flashed as on a screen. I shook the image off. I looked at Trace and Kent. Then, as will happen, I saw the cow. I drove the heifer from my mind, looked again at Trace. For an instant, I saw Trace as June: a trick of mind and light. The phenomenon, though short-lived, seemed true, like a religious vision.

* * *

Kent's wife, June, applies mascara perfectly. Large women are careful that way, and sad. And June, too, in the past twelve months, has deserved attention, even care. I've suggested this to Kent, have mentioned professional help. "Yes, of course you're right," he says. He nods his head. "You're right."

Kent moved from his house into a condo, and June began to visit me. "What am I supposed to do?" she'd ask. I'd return her look, then mix us drinks. She'd claim the couch, sink in, weep. She seemed certain that for the remainder of her life no one would ever follow her, trail her on a street. Inverse paranoia. She'd weep, then threaten suicide. Finally, I said, "Well, June, it's a choice."

Saturday, the following week (Alex, by chance, spending the night with friends), June stopped by. Returning from the kitchen with fourth-round drinks, I interrupted June. She was stuffing her brassiere into her purse. She leaned back: spread her blouse, dimmed the lamp, reached up for her drink. She smelled of lanolin and rain.

I sat across the room.

What I wanted were the breasts; what there also was, was June. I asked June to dress. She tipped her drink into her lap. I stood to help, but June waved me off. I retook my seat, and we both sat, host and guest, while a good wool skirt absorbed Scotch. June's skirt so drew our attention that it took on a presence we both embraced. June paid attention to the skirt, plunked ice back into her glass. I stayed on my side of the room, watched her do it.

In time, she stood, a final, dazed, half-hearted display—a wan band of fat folding at her hips—then stepped, transporting the remainder of her drink, to the bathroom in the hall. I watched June step away. Staring at her clothed back, I calculated the swing of the bare front.

June disappeared from the hall to the bathroom; as she pivoted, I caught a last glimpse. June saw I had; she froze for the merest second, shoulders hunched, then beamed me the sweetest smile. I'd finished my drink when June emerged. She came to me; we held. "My chest is my best thing," she said. "Your chest is wonderful," I said. June didn't

stop her visits, but she managed to stay dressed.

* * *

Kent, like June, is in his forties. As such stories go, he and Trace's husband, Ray, were fraternity brothers as undergraduates in Ohio, where June was the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi, and Kent the Army ROTC detachment cadet commander, which was as much a reason as any why they wed and then rode out an additional twenty-five years. That, and the glue of anyone's marriage: houses and children and dogs. Oriental rugs. The signed prints you buy one summer—the children still small—in Duluth. Applewood being burned. Snow. Tulips. A great-aunt's crystal swan. Shingles shedding rain. The scent of oyster stew.

Kent claims he didn't know Trace at college, that he met her the day she married Ray. At Case Western in Ohio, Kent was a student who carefully read writing texts and since has written three: *Freshman Composition I, II & III.* He's sold these books, to his embarrassment, he claims, but also collects, each year, the royalties and is working on a fourth, *Freshman Composition IV.* He invests the money in his own hot-air balloon which, tethered, outrises a seven-story house. "In the air," he says, "she swims."

I tell Kent the whole thing strikes me as a bother. I wave at the propane tanks; the flame; the thick-caned graceless basket. "And goddamned dangerous," I say. I mention power lines and trees. "Rocks, Kent. Water. *The necessity to land."*

If Kent is near enough to the basket, he'll rub the cane. "In the air," he says, "she swims." Kent seems armoured beyond any of my friends, protected by dull-witted but attentive angels. It makes you not want to think.

An accredited English scholar—quite apart from the freshman texts—Kent calls himself a hack. He'll publicly threaten retirement and the penning of a novel, then laugh. "Stop it," I say. "What you live is your life. Not all problems can be solved by writing fiction."

"That's just not so," he says.

"Like hell it's not," I say.

Kent knows this at least as well as I, but after a life of achievement, he will become, at times, boozily contrite for his central professional coup: a critic's orderly arrangement of myth. *The tidy myth dictionary,* he says. *The hard cover a student will buy.*

"Does buy," I correct. "Stop apologizing, Kent."

"You," says Kent. *"You* shake the moon."

What do you do with a man like Kent? You drive him home. You can do that. You put him in his bed.

For a hundred and eighty bucks, Kent will bear two customers aloft.

He sails, bargaining with wind. "Up there," he says, "you don't fight the wind. You're it." He sails in full or veiled sun. He serves champagne.

* * *

On the evening of the day we met, Trace turned from the front seat of the car, "Stephen, you do everything so quickly." In the dark, I looked at the back of Kent—his hands in charge of the moving car—then stared at Trace. Later that first night—Kent at the bar for drinks—Trace asked if Kent would do coke. I said I didn't know. Trace opened her purse, then stopped, "I see." Whether Trace had cocaine in her purse, I don't know. She may have been thinking of testing me, or of testing Kent, or not.

My first letter to Trace was short. I wanted to ask whether she told her husband when she had other men. I asked instead, "Will you marry Kent?"

Kent is not, by nature, smug. But I wearied of his talk of Trace. I wearied of his luck, his *trust:* a ballooner's simple faith in the properties of air. I wanted Trace. But you knew that, as well as you know that Kent is no cartoon. I blamed him for his luck. I blamed him for June's fat. You find ways.

"Will you marry Kent?" I asked.

"I may marry Kent," Trace said.

Trace and I never went to bed. I wrote to her. She wrote to me, and she would visit Kent. Once, in my and Kent's town, we met for lunch. "What did you say to Kent?"

"I told him I'd be with you," said Trace. "I told him I was going to lunch."

She'd brought summer berries from her parents' farm and had saved a pint for me. I pictured her on the plane, jars of berries in her lap. *You have no decent fruit in Colorado. Here, I've brought you fruit.* That night she and Kent returned to Pennsylvania. I drank and wrote letters. Here is one I sent:

> Fruit is available in my state. Aridity and altitude are easy marks for long-haul truckers, hiked costs. Though it's dusk, you can see the sun for the first time in three days. You should know that two blocks from where we lunched a "mini-tornado" carried away part of the roof of a discount dental clinic. But what is a "mini-tornado"? For the dental clinic—cut-rate or not—wasn't it A TORNADO?

I wrote more letters. Weeks later she answered back—a letter about her husband:

Raymond has Guillain-Barré syndrome—the swine flu virus some people got two years ago following their flu shots. Raymond has lost all motor ability. Thursday I took him home from the hospital again. Someday, if you ask, I will speak to you of that—the *quiet.* R. has not taught since the end of this spring term. He spent 24 days in a hospital bed and has been back in again. He'd never been in a hospital before. I've moved back into the house. I miss Kent. I miss you. The woman you choose is destined for some pain, for you do dole out the latter whenever you see fit. Women are accused of being contrived, but you—you do your share. I wish you were here now. Take care of Kent, take care of you. Please tell me what is real.

"Tell you what is real?" I wrote. Then:

Charlie Chaplin once entered a Charlie Chaplin look-alike competition. Charlie came in third. How would I know what's real?

I suppose I could have said that Trace and I went to bed and, with that step, stepped into the other's life forever—that we discovered realms. But we didn't go to bed; we wrote. Trace divorced Ray. She hadn't loved him when he was well. And Kent divorced June, with the finality of that act seeming to be of help to her. *The finality of acts.* The benignity, the imperative of rites: champagne in flight; darker wine in church; food offered as gift, as sacrament. *Flesh.*

Trace called to say she and Kent had picked a date. I asked about Ray. She said he was still confined to bed. "His mother's back," she said. "I can't be ungrateful to her for that."

So Trace arrived in the fall in Colorado, ready to marry Kent. The night she arrived was her birthday and was the eve of mine, so the three of us met for dinner—Kent's idea—a combination *fête.* Kent and Trace were late, so I waited at the bar. When they walked in, Trace handed me, for my birthday, a loaf of fresh-baked bread she had carted on board the plane from Pennsylvania. *You have no decent bread in Colorado.* I didn't choose to share the bread. At dinner, I tightened the waxy bag, laid it at my feet.

After dinner, we moved outside the restaurant with drinks and sat, in coats, around a fire a waiter had replenished and banked: no place, Trace said, to speak of domes or marble. The courtyard was stone and dirt and had fire pits with facing benches. There was a rail fence. Trace pointed to the restaurant behind. "Adobe is mud," she said. "Yes," said Kent. They turned to me. I nodded my head: *agreed.* We were drunk in the dark. We were, stubbornly, the three of us, bareheaded. The ground at our feet was cold. The busboys had begun to clear inside, the waiters

to compute their tips. The night seemed vast; the city glittered. The city reminded me of hospital stainless steel, flashing back directed light. I leaned back from the fire, breathed in; the air smelled of scorched metal.

A waiter first brought out wood, then another round of drinks. He looked outward from the bluff which rose above the roads, the complex luminescence: a ballooner's restaurant, said Kent. "Last call," the waiter replied, then handed us our drinks. "My round," I said, standing, holding to the night, rooting for my wallet. The waiter grinned, offered back no change. You could almost see his breath. You could see his teeth.

When I sat, I reached to touch my bread, its wrapping as warm as the cloth of my pants. In the morning, I would eat the bread, and the morning after that. I sat and drank. My hands had the feel for me of having encircled iron rails or the cold runners of a sled. I thought of the dead steel blades of skates and that one winter before I was born I'd had a sister who had died on New Year's Day because she'd chewed a Christmas ornament made of glass. Did my baby sister, absent now forty years, think she'd bitten into a plum? "My grandfather was a light-heavyweight," I said. "His name was Arthur Mann. He whipped the light-heavyweight champion of the world."

Kid Dixie had barnstormed through Butte, Montana, on the train, set up a ring, offered to take on comers—winner-take-all—non-title. It was 1936. My grandfather removed his shirt, put out his hands for gloves. He stepped through the ropes in his work shoes. It was a rough affair. The champ wasn't having his way and panicked. My grandfather could fight and had no intention of lying down. He crowded the champ, bore in, whaled on the champion's ribs. Then, in the fourth round, his own right eye punched shut, Arthur knocked Kid Dixie on his can: a right—all instinct—from his blind right side to the champion's jaw. The punch travelled less than a foot.

The crowd went nuts. One-eyed, my grandfather Arthur took the cash, climbed from the ring, walked home with his son, my father. How many chances like that does a father have? Would Arthur have tried, even in his dreams, to have lived another life?

And me? I'd separated my kids—brother and sister—and lived a professional life which rested, not on a win-or-lose fight, but on the writing of an unread book. Would my son's son remember me? What stories could he tell? I began to ask myself some questions: could I truly say I wanted my friend's balloon? Let's say, I said to myself, Kent's balloon was actually mine. Was it in me to trust a means of travel fueled by mere heated air? And how to calculate this mistrust? a strength? a flaw? I couldn't answer my own questions, so I closed my eyes. I looked for Spec's cow, but didn't see her. What I saw was a diagram of a black hole, a schematic, from Spec's book of the unseeable death of stars.

"Of da world?" Kent asked.

I turned to Kent, opened my eyes.

"Of da world?" he said.

Kent's face in focus, I drew breath.

Kent flailed a fist in the dark. "Your grandfather," he said.

I thought about that—my grandfather had licked the light-heavyweight boxing champion of the world—yes, that was something. My father had told me the story. If the story wasn't true, I thought, it should be. I raised my glass toward Kent. "Of da world," I said. Kent stuck out his glass, clinked mine. But before he took a drink, he ducked, shot another, almost savage punch toward his ghost opponent.

I thought about my grandfather again—Kid Dixie knocked bowlegged to his back on the canvas. For four rounds in 1936—the third round shaved thirty seconds, Dixie's manager as panicked as his champ—in a broken country, *winner-take-all,* two men had worked to earn their livings. It seemed impossible in a night so vast not to crave such an even chance at victory or defeat. No split-decision.

I poked my hands at the fire.

Trace stared and stared at stars: red giants and white dwarfs.

"Just when you need your father's father," I said, "he's been dead for twenty years. When I die," I said, "who will be left to love him?"

Kent tossed what was left of the wood into the fire which we circled and which blazed, but we still all huddled closer, cradling our drinks. Fire and ice. And wind, baked stone. Kent turned, then stood to see if there were more wood piled about. "The restaurant looks closed," he said.

I unwrapped my bread, tore off chunks. We chewed the bread, and drank. I kissed Kent and Trace, then sat back down, leaned forward. What I wanted to feel was seemliness and love, but what I felt was scalded by the dry wood's high flame.

On the highway below, the traffic was mostly truckers—mirror constellations, untimed, unplanned—the lapses in between rich small black holes.

You let yourself look up, but what stars watch is not your life.

"Of course they don't. You watch them," says Trace.

You stare at Trace. Have you been speaking aloud?

You tip your head. All you see is sky: *Andromeda. Centaurus. Giant Orion, the Hunter. Taurus. Red-Haired Nudes. Glimmering, Velvet Chairs.* By means of dead or living light, you map the path of worlds: bright soot. And time.

How to Have Heart Disease (Without Really Trying)

J. A. Hamilton

Understand that it will happen when you least expect it. It's Christmas '85 the first time you feel something strange, and when you try to describe it you say goofy things like *I haven't got a mole's nose of an idea what it is* and *a sinking sensation in my chest?* Populate the house with kids and friends. Your kids, your brother's kids. Your mother-in-law, Sarah Williams. Your husband, Greg. Your friend from down the street, Jean, who's going through a nasty divorce. A house guest named Gail. The house guest's friend, Emilia, a famous poet, who is old and cranky, a little like the day at 6 p.m. Give her a bottle of Okanagan Chardonnay and watch her dispatch it. Eat too much. Eat turkey and stuffing, beets redder than flames and mashed potatoes. There are yellow bells on the Christmas tree, plump unwinking lights in blues and greens, and paper decorations your daughters made. Imagine that you are thirty-one years old. Where did you find this life?

Watch Emilia drink and drink, the bottle down beside her toes within easy reach. Inside your chest snow begins to melt. You have never known a white Christmas in Vancouver—today it is raining hard—but even though the sensation isn't of cold, it feels as though you've got Frosty the Snowman right under your ribs. Say, *There must have been some magic in that old silk hat they found, for when they placed it on his head, he began to dance around.* Remember that sometimes the sun comes out. Snowmen turn into puddles.

There are six children running through your house. Your kitten climbs the curtains or bats a gold bow across the floor. Or squirms out of Emilia's arms to climb up her arm and lick her hairspray. In the kitchen, your husband and sister-in-law are doing dishes. The famous poet doesn't have much to say—she won't talk about poetry anyhow, no matter how your mother-in-law tries to draw her out. *What kind of poems do you write?* your mother-in-law asks. Emilia came to fame as a communist in the 1930s and has written something like twenty books. Even, though she was married three times, a book of love poems for women. But she won't talk about them. She's Gail's friend. Gail, the guest from Banff who you'll end

up hating. By the end of her two week visit, you'll pin a sketch of her to the kitchen wall and throw darts at it while your children skip around your legs singing *We hate Gail! We hate Gail!* You'll score one bull's eye. Despite it, Gail will continue to appear throughout your days. She will peel oranges. She will light sweet grass and walk from room to room waving it and intoning something that sounds like 'Inagodadavida.' She will stand in your living room, raise her arms and hoot. She will howl like a dog. When you stumble in on her, she will explain it as a type of yoga. As you carry the toilet bowl brush to the upstairs bathroom, she will trail along behind you speaking of goddesses.

But before that, you have to take the famous poet back across the storming city. She lives in a basement hovel on the University Endowment lands, which is not what you expected. You don't expect much from poets, it's true, but you do expect that the prominent ones live above ground.

It's that swampy, soggy part of the holidays three days after Christmas and three days before New Year's. You go to the hospital wearing torn jeans and a t-shirt. You are ambulatory; your husband, concerned to hear you exactly describing his dead father's chest pains, has driven you. The triage nurse orders an immediate wheelchair. But your description of *a vice, squeezing me,* doesn't impress the resident, Dr. Inglis, who looks at you lying on the stretcher in your knockabout clothes and tells you you're the wrong age and gender for a heart attack. Ergo, you can't be having one. Even though the nurse suggests an ECG and you yourself are reduced to begging *please let me stay,* he overrules both of you. He takes blood gases, and when the results are in, sends you home with a tiny white envelope of Tylenol 3s.

Why not go back? You have all the dizzy night with pain trouncing through you; fifteen hours in total, in fact, while you moan and thrash and guzzle Tylenols.

Say you are tall. Say you are younger than thirty-one. Say you are blond. Say you are as exquisite as a peach. Wear a formal, low cut gown and have the ambulance driver lug along a chaise lounge. When Dr. Inglis examines you, be coy about exposing your breasts. When you beg for help, make your voice whispery and deep. Sink onto your couch like a dancer. Tell Dr. Inglis you're open to having sex with him, if only he saves your life.

If that doesn't work, go a third time disguised as an old person. Putting the makeup over your young skin will take four of your fifteen agonising hours. Hobble into emergency. Vomit up the T 3s. Call Dr. Inglis *young man.* Tell him you won't have sex with him, if only he saves your life.

In the morning, the physician on call in your doctor's call group is someone you've never met. The pain is over, at last, and you are lying limp and sweaty in your marital bed, as exhausted as if you've just expelled something the size of a bowling ball out of your vagina. The kitten is sitting on the pillow beside your head, nibbling your hair. Your husband is alarmed that your pain lasted fifteen hours. He wants a second opinion. He wants to reassure himself. This doctor is as cranky as a poet; he demands to know why you're still in bed if the pain is gone. He doesn't come within five feet of you. He tells you you probably have esophagitis, which is a problem related to indigestion, and sends your husband out to buy you some Gaviscon antacid. *And get up,* the doctor adds.

Pick a point in the centre of your chest. Break it open. Use something, say a hammer, and inflict as much damage as you can without screaming. This is what it feels like when your heart is suffocating. This is realistic. Pick a point in the centre of your chest. Drink sherry and feel the warmth radiate through you. Now have someone punch hard enough to crack a rib. Although you are in pain, remember the delicious spread of the sherry. That suffusion and this pain, that's what it's like when your heart screams for oxygen. Pick a point in the centre of your chest. Have someone draw a red magic marker target on you. Have someone shoot an arrow through it. This is the sensation of a myocardial infarction. That event. It starts somewhere central and for a second it doesn't hurt, there's just that spreading, sinking feeling. Then it radiates. It radiates to your back and down your arms and up your neck into your jaw. It doesn't start by screaming. Screaming comes later. Try and describe it. Tell me the sound of a perfect scream. Tell me the sound of a scream that is broken. Why is your tongue so thick? Can't your tongue beat and beat like a heart?

Gaviscon antacid is mmm-mmm good, and it reminds you of sucking on a piece of chalk in Mrs. Davidson's second grade classroom. You pour ropes of it down your throat every time you appear to need it. *Wait,* you say when your husband takes you dancing, *I have that feeling like a hyena is laughing in my chest.* Sometimes it doesn't stop, Gaviscon notwithstanding, and you notice your knuckles are white from the fists your hands make.

Although you are just a young woman, you begin to talk about mercy.

Your doctor's receptionist calls you on a Tuesday and the first words out of her mouth are, *Holy cow, are you all right?*

This makes you look down at yourself. You are all in one piece, as far as you can see.

The doctor wants to see you, she says. *Right away. She got the hospital report.*

You have never particularly liked your doctor. Or doctors in general. You are agoraphobic, but only about doctors. *Fear of physicians.* All sorts of things can go wrong in doctors' offices, so wrong that you would rather not leave your house.

You go to a cardiologist who puts round stickers all over your chest so that you look like a weird alien. He tells you to step up on a treadmill. This is a sidewalk about four feet long with a rubber walkway. Somebody hits a switch and the walkway suddenly moves. You keep waiting to make a pratfall, because it rotates faster than your legs so that you have to take wide strides and small skips to keep up.

After the exam, the cardiologist tells you in a sombre voice that at some prior point you had a heart attack. *You have an old anterior MI,* is how he phrases this. He explains about dead cells, about how you have a necrotized patch of them in the centre of your heart muscle.

Say, *I went to the hospital that night and they made me go home.*

Watch his lips move as he says, *Never, ever go to that hospital again.*

The implication is that as long as you stick with him, you'll never have a home heart attack again. Though you don't feel that way, the implication is that you are saved.

Mommy's very sick, you say that night before you read *Green Eggs and Ham* to your daughters. *She has to go to the hospital to get some tests. But just overnight. One sleep.*

The younger girl's thumb is tucked in her mouth. She has to take it out to talk and it's all white and wrinkly. *Read,* she says.

The older girl says, *Grampa never went home again.*

How do you leave your small children? How do you assure them that though you may soon be dead, you'll always be there for them?

When you phrase it like this for Greg, he says you're overly dramatic. *It's not like you're going to die tomorrow,* he says. He has been very abrupt with you since the diagnosis: all you can think is that he's mourning his father and taking it out on you. He says spectacularly mean things, like, *It'll take more than a bum heart to do* you *in.* You wonder what more would be: heart disease, cancer and diabetes? Heart disease and German measles? Heart disease and esophagitis?

Because you haven' t vacuumed in so long, there's a pubic hair on the floor of the bathroom. You sit and wonder who it belongs to. Neither of your children have developed such hair and so it couldn't be theirs. It

might be yours. Or Greg's, or Gail's. Or the famous poet's? But hers would surely be grey. You could send this one in for DNA testing and if it comes back tagged as a match to the skin flake on the wine bottle she drank from, you could frame it in a glass box like a bronzed baby shoe.

In the hospital, a nurse prods you awake at two a.m. to let you know your smallest daughter, who is four, is hospitalized because she's been crying blood. Blink into consciousness. Demand to go to her. Children's Hospital branches off the hospital you're in; skip down hall after hall with your robe flitting open in back. You have a vial of nitroglycerin tablets clutched in your fist, but you don't have time to stop to take one. Angina barrels through your chest. When you finally reach Children's, find out your daughter has been discharged and your husband has taken her back home. *She just had a nosebleed,* someone says. Feel like dropping in sheer relief. Feel like dropping from cardiac arrest.

In the morning, a nurse shaves you. She leaves a Mohican inch of hair in the middle of your pubic patch. You try for joviality. You say, *We have to stop meeting like this. My husband is getting suspicious.* When you were a little girl, you misread the words pubic hair as public hair. This caused numerous adjustment problems.

You are warehoused inside a room of catheters. Until today, you have never seen a catheter. But here they are, like brake line hoses only thinner and translucent, hanging from hooks like a thousand pelting rain drops. Before long, you are wheeled into the operating room. The cardiologist asks you how you are and you say, *My daughter cried blood.* The cardiologist slides a catheter through an incision on your thigh. Then he shoots in radioactive dye. *This will feel hot,* he says, and it's true, you're a match, a candle, a torch, ignited. The top of your head blows off. On the x-ray monitor, a picture of your heart comes up like a shadowy apple tree, its arteries gnarled and twisted as sticks. You were shown a "So You're Having an Angiogram" video in a narrow slice of room the night before and so you know this picture only means one thing.

You have to stay in bed for a dozen hours before your cardiologist shows up. He tells you you have one completely occluded artery and one artery that is 50–75% blocked in three places. You have been lying flat on your back all day with a sandbag to prevent haemorrhage covering the catheter entrance point on your upper thigh. Wiggle your toes. Get up out of bed while he's talking. Walk into the hall. You have blue magic marker crosses on your feet; this is where the nurses have been monitoring your pulses. The doctor says, *You have the insides of a seventy-year-old.*

Say, *Oh, but the lips of a girl.* Tell him thanks anyhow. You'll forgo the pleasure of bypass heart surgery. You won't even try a balloon angioplasty.

You'll stick with drugs. Agree to see him several times a year. Go home gingerly and climb into bed. When you look down at yourself, you'll see that awful, itchy pubic patch and on your right thigh, a mottled purple and green bruise as big as a basketball. Your arm is bruised, too, from IVs.

Point and say to your husband, *This is where they inserted the recreational vehicle.*

Greg will stare at you blankly.

Say, *RV? Get it?* Laugh uproariously and slap his knee.

Your youngest daughter will appear in the doorway holding the cat by its neck. It looks like roadkill.

You will watch year add to year and feel sorry for yourself every one of them. You will get a new car. Your old one will have seized up on you. A question, the mechanic says, of oil. That's what you tell your friends when they ask why you now drive a station wagon. You say, *It was all my fault. I thought the Volvo would self-lubricate.* Against your will, your cat will grow into a huge, slumbering fur ball who is still addicted to hair spray. Against your will, your oldest child will turn into an adolescent. Against your will, your ex-friend Gail will write to say the poet Emilia had her licence suspended for drunk driving.

Against your will, your husband will leave you. This is probably because he and your friend Jean from down the street got involved after commiserating about the stress of being in your life. The way Greg told it was that it was accidental.

An accidental affair? you screech as he carries stacks of sweaters from his dresser.

She understands me, he says petulantly.

You promise him everything. You promise him things you can't possibly deliver, like insider trading information on the VSE. You promise to introduce him to Madonna. Or Roseanne.

That's it, he says. *That's it. Jean's not irrational. She's a completely calm human being.*

You would dearly like to calm Jean's human being for all eternity.

Occasionally you have nightmares. You are urged to cross a bridge, leaving your children behind. This is at night. Inevitably, there is fog, some of which you carry over your shoulder in a scarf tied onto a stick. It's mushy like a pillow, but it's all you'll need where you're going. That's what everyone says when you ask. They look at you with eyes as yellow as dollar coins and they say, *That's all you'll need where you're going.* They never blink. When you wake up, you try to imagine a land where fog is the currency.

Your daughter arrives with a bin of cosmetics and begs to make you up. Outside it's raining again, with gale force winds. One of the shutters has come loose and it's knocking against the side of the house. After your daughter smears red lipstick on your lips, your cat licks it off, slowly, deliberately, working from the left to the right.

You add up anginal attacks. The six year total is about 18,000. You resent able-bodied people. You watch them not calculate stairs. You watch in-line skaters sweeping down the sea wall in fast, smooth arcs. You watch women in spandex cycle. You watch them just go and go with their fabulous bodies, while yours worsens and worsens. It's simply not fair. You have been diagnosed with claudication, which means that you are developing bruits inside the arterial stems of your body. Which means that your circulatory system is shutting down.

Brutes, brutes, there are brutes inside you, pummelling you inside out.

Your cardiologist has moved his practice out of town. You try a woman, who tells you the tree of you is dying. You wonder if she is a poet in her spare time. You think about Emilia, who is now in a nursing home in Victoria. The cardiologist accuses you of causing your heart disease by using cocaine, which you have never tried. When she writes her report, later, she also accuses you of lying about your age, of trying to say you're younger than you really are. This is her way of believing in your disease. If you are older, you make more sense. She writes, This patient *claims* to be only thirty-seven years old.

She tells you that in fifteen years your legs will have to be amputated.

Say, *I'll be known as stump girl.* Imagine how happy this will make your ex-husband and Jean.

She looks at you as if you' re totally cracked and says, *You are a vascular disaster.*

Each year your chance of dying increases at the rate of 5%. By now you have a 30% chance of dying at any moment.

This is particular fun, because you can make up intriguing scenarios: in the bathtub, behind the wheel of a car, in an airplane, while holding a newborn baby. Imagine a woman carrying a baby down a long flight of stairs. Imagine her tripping. Imagine her startled cry, her body folding and falling, the baby flying out of her arms. What does death look like?

Why did the heart crip cross the road?

She thought she saw some salt.

Imagine a woman in a car wreck. Imagine crumpled steel; pretend there's smoke. Where there's smoke, there's fire, and the woman is still behind the wheel. Imagine she starts screaming as the flames reach her. Even the jaws of life can't save her.

Imagine a bomb going off inside you. Tick. Tick Tick. Tick. Some

little terrorist presses 'on.'

You once saw Sammy Davis Jr. in concert. This was when he was alive, years before he had throat cancer. He sauntered onto the stage smoking, holding a drink in a sweaty glass with ice cubes. Rye, it looked like. He told the audience that unlike him, people without vices woke up and knew that they felt as good as they were going to feel all day. That impressed you so much you had a series of dreams of becoming his wife, in which you too smoked and drank and felt like crap on waking. You woke up missing him. This was before he died.

You decide that if you're going to lose your legs, you might as well use them first. Although you have been discreet about men, believing your daughters need every semblance of stability that you can provide, now you start dating again. At first, you're at a loss about how to meet men, but eventually you figure out that you can meet them at the sushi bar in grocery stores. You date casually. You date anyone who won't make too much of a fuss if you die during sex. You practice passing out, and tell every lover where to find your nitroglycerin. One ex-boyfriend tells a friend that he suspects you don't really have heart disease. This gets back to you. He says you're probably faking.

You get word to him that you're also lying about your age.

Your daughters are leaf thin. Your cat licks your new boyfriend's hair and once, in the middle of the night, is discovered sucking his scrotum.

Your capacities neither ebb nor flow. Over the years, you live a truncated life that is physically non-challenging, although from time to time you take up a routine of non-aerobic stretches. You wish the experience of having heart disease would teach you something. Anything. You are supposed to have learned to live in the moment; you are supposed to have gained perspective; you are supposed to have grown wise in knowledge that escapes the general public. But none of this has happened. Instead, the disease short-circuits you. At one point, you even end up on welfare.

How many welfare mothers does it take to change a light bulb?

Who has money for light bulbs?

Your GP ups your dosage of beta blockers. She says you shouldn't be having so much angina. She says you shouldn't be having any, if possible. *Cells die every time,* she says. You are reluctant to fill her prescription: she wants you to go from 200 mg to 400 mg of acebutolol then, if the angina isn't under control, up to 800 mg a day. You ask questions about fatigue. Already you drag around like someone without legs; won't your exhaustion increase? She shrugs. *What about claudication?* you ask,

because beta blockers exacerbate your trouble walking. She looks a little peeved at you, as if you're as cranky and demanding as a poet.

The first month is wonderful. Over Christmas, your ninth since the heart attack, you actually feel better than you have in years. It's not a question of energy—just, your angina levels are down. At a memorable New Year's dance, you can actually dance a whole song without running into trouble. When you do run into trouble you spray nitroglycerin. Your date, a brand new man, rears back and says, *I don't like the smell of that.*

But after January, you might as well be on a crash course with disaster. Your angina levels increase exponentially, no matter how many beta blockers you swallow. You look at yourself in the mirror as if you are already a ghost. You *are* already a ghost. You are only half visible, fading. Not at the edges, but at the centre. The angina comes on like acid, eating away and leaving you empty, like a tire or a doughnut.

Imagine empty things. A glass. A suitcase. A shoe. A bed. The space where once was a heart.

You try to arrange your life on one floor of the house. You make sure there's no need to go upstairs to your bedroom during the day, even keeping your socks balled like kittens in a pot in the kitchen cupboard. You make sure never to need the washer or dryer in the basement.

You begin to wonder about grace.

The truth is, you need help. The truth is, you can't go to the bathroom without getting angina, and it is probably a mere fifteen steps away. The truth is, you can't eat. A meal is an anginal misery, but so, to a shorter extent, is any nibble: a cracker, a cookie, a slice of bread. Eating anything brings on a wowzer of pain.

What colour is your pain? It is orange. What shape is your pain? It is round. What texture is your pain? It is bumpy. Does your pain hold water? It holds tankfuls. What smell does your pain have? The smell of fear.

Can your cat smell your pain? You doubt it. She is busy on the counter in the bathroom with a tub of Vaseline petroleum jelly, scooping handfuls out with her paw and consuming them.

What you do over and over again is spritz nitro and time your pains, just like you remember doing during labour. Five, ten, fifteen minutes. That's the outside envelope, according to doctors. If the angina doesn't resolve in fifteen minutes, you're supposed to call for an ambulance. Fifteen minutes signifies not angina, but a heart attack. You breathe slowly and deliberately, filling your lungs with oxygen, so that, if your vessels do decide to expand, there'll be plenty of O_2 at their beck and call. Think of jokes.

Q: How do you get twenty-seven Canadians out of a swimming pool?
A: You say, *Please get out of the swimming pool.*
Q: What's the difference between OJ Simpson and Christopher Reeves?
A: Only one's going to walk.

You have angina that's lasted through ten sprays of nitro, an overdose, and seventeen minutes. This was brought on by the reckless consumption of an orange. If it goes over twenty minutes, maybe you'll call for help.

What else you can't do. The usual—run, jog, walk, kayak. But also you can't have sex, and you're still seeing Mr. Christmas, the new man, who finds this trying. He fondles himself while lying beside you, which arouses you. But arousal brings on angina, so you try lying stiff as a board, which eventually settles you both down.

You can't sleep. Night after night, many times a night, you wake in full blown attacks, as if dream exercise has brought you to the brink of doom. You worry you've started to dream about Richard Simmons.

Plus all your joints hurt. You wake with your hands completely numb and when sensation returns, still your tendons and your knuckles ache and ache. You can hardly use your fingers. Unscrewing a bottle cap is out of the question.

Your doctor slides across her examining room on a stool with castors and says, *You know, all those years ago I expected you might go downhill fast.* She is congratulating you for having come this far, but you also hear the implication that now your goose is pretty well cooked. She tells you you've got something called crescendo angina. Which sounds, to your mind, pretty, like something from a ballet, maybe, or something to do with a fountain in a park. It's big and gushing, anyhow, and loud, and surely not representative of the pinched, mean constriction of blood that is what you experience.

You might want to prepare your affairs, she says.

You think of your affair and how you might prepare it. You honestly don't believe there's any way. Mr. Christmas is dense and not as smart as your cat, and you can't imagine him caring much. You think of his big white body as a turkey and imagine slathering him in oil. But this is just an idle fantasy. What your doctor is truly asking is whether you have found a home for your children or your hairspray-addicted cat.

Naturally, you have made plans. Naturally, you have life insurance which you never let lapse; you have a living will even though they're not recognised in BC; you have a regular will. There's not much else to do. When you get home, you gather your daughters together and say, *Girls, the doctor says my heart may be getting worse.*

Like this is news? says the younger one. *'Run up and get my book.' 'Just pop down and see if my clothes are dry.'*

Oh, Mommy, says the older one.

I may need surgery, you say. *You can stay with Daddy and Jean. We'll pray for a good outcome.* You reach across to squeeze the little one's hand. But she is at the stage where she insists you drop her off four blocks from her destination, so she isn't going to sit still for something mushy.

She yanks away and says, *Can I have my allowance?*

The older one blinks. She's at a loss for words. Finally, she asks, *Me too?*

The first step is to get you to a cardiologist. This one is a man, a young man with a bland, expressionless face that reminds you of your cat's. You sit by the side of his desk. He comments on the book you've brought along to read in his waiting room, the volume of Emilia's love poetry for women. This reassures you, because it shows he has a dimension.

When you tell him your history, he seems very impressed. He perks right up. He leans forward and his shoulders tense. A nerve in his cheek goes to twitching. It used to be that you were such an anomaly that cardiologists could be imagined rubbing their hands with a sort of anticipatory glee, but by now you are forty—not so precocious. *Do you get a lot of young women with heart disease?* you ask.

He says no. Eagerly, he takes copies of your old cardiology reports and copies of your old angiogram results and inquires about your medications. You tell him about a new drug, Diltiazem, that your GP put you on a few days earlier, and how it's actually helped, actually reduced the episodes of angina to just dozens a day.

He wants you to be examined at the lipid clinic, to have a test called a MIBI scan, to have another diagnostic angiogram and probably a revascularization.

You are drowning in doctor speak. You long, suddenly, for your lump of a non-verbal boyfriend, for stupid grunts and I dunnos. *Revascularization?* you ask. And then before he has a chance to answer you say, *I can't have another angiogram. I'm still not over the trauma of the last one.*

He says, grinning, sassy, flirting, leaning back in his chair: *You haven't had* my *angiogram.*

You find yourself blinking. You expect him to show you his red Ferrari; you expect him to whip out his penis to show you how neat it is. There is a pink plastic heart on his desk; he taps his pen on it, impressed with himself. He starts to whistle.

Hey, you say, *how many cardiologists does it take to change a light bulb?*

Now he blinks too.

In front of your mirror, wear your cat like a fur stole. She will be hiding under your hair where you've sprayed a thick layer of what she likes, Clairol brand. She's ferocious and intent. She's not going anywhere. You undress very very slowly. Lately, you've had irregular periods and have been gaining weight, which you think might be the start of menopause. Because you are constantly dizzy and stumbling, symptoms of low blood pressure, you've decreased your acebutolol, slashing your dose in half. It's the other drug, anyhow, that seems to be working to quell the angina. You observe your full, slightly pendulous breasts. You try to imagine the heart underneath them. You try to imagine the incision between them, the zipper scars it will leave. You trace down your smooth, soft skin while under your hair your cat suckles.

Pain 1. Suffering or loss inflicted for a crime or offence; punishment. To torture by way of punishment—OED

The MIBI scan takes place during a wretched storm at an unholy hour in a downtown hospital.

Your thick stick of a boyfriend delivers you, and agrees to pick you up at noon. You know he'll be late; you know he'll forget what floor you're on. The first step is to have a radioactive dye injected into your arm. A funny, sweet, probably gay technician is responsible for this. He straps an IV to your arm, explaining that they may need this site later to administer other drugs.

He says, *You'll be a little radioactive. You won't glow in the dark, though.*

Say, *That's because it's morning.*

There is a two hour wait between the dye's injection and the first scan. You are sent to the cafeteria and asked to ingest something with butter. You never eat breakfast. You long for a cup of coffee, but caffeine is forbidden, as it has been for the last day. You choose a bran muffin and after slathering it with margarine, sit eating it at a small table, masticating reluctantly, watching staff walk through in hospital greens and baby pinks.

The bed for imaging is as narrow as a balance beam. The technician here has questions. *How tall are you? How much do you weigh? What size bra do you wear?* You can't imagine the relevance, but you answer in monosyllables as you lie on your back and let the woman strap you in. The truth is that you never wear a bra. You keep one in your drawer for social occasions where nipples are a no-no, but you've only put it on once, for your divorce.

A small placard says, *Caution: Do not stare into laser beam.* The bed

moves like a whisper inside a chamber. You're surrounded. It's hot and humid, claustrophobic.

Wearing your blue hospital gown, you are directed to another wing where you have to wait for your exercise test. You sit on the edge of a gurney swinging your radioactive legs. A technician comes in to attach twelve electrodes, which you know will rip your skin off when they're removed. They're made to stick even to men's hairy chests.

The technician busies herself with a clipboard. *Are you part of a family?* she asks.

You try to maintain your good humour. You say, *Isn't everyone?* and sigh as if it was a fate you'd hoped to avoid.

I mean, are you part of your own *family?*

You say, *Uh-uh, I'm part of my neighbour's.*

The technician stares at you then makes a noise of disgust in her throat. *You're just making this harder on yourself than it has to be,* she says.

The test room has an unfortunate lay-out. There's a treadmill in the middle of the room facing a wall, and behind it, at a small desk, sits a doctor, present in case of emergencies. Wires are hooked up to your sticky leads and you're set to walking. You have upped your new medications: you are proud of your capacity.

Behind you, in a voice high pitched, the doctor says, *Mrs. Williams! Mrs. Williams!*

You are strolling along with your bottom exposed.

Mrs. Williams! he cries again. *Did you know you've had a heart attack?*

Say, *That was a pizza, not a heart attack.* Which makes no sense, but you don' t care. You've only mumbled it. He probably hasn't even heard. But there is a stirring of great excitement in the room.

I have angina, you say loudly and firmly when it erupts, but the technician beside you only nods. If you don't manage your angina with complete cessation of activity and nitroglycerin, it will feel, within seconds, like an elephant has lowered his bottom over your face, wanting either to kill you or to have oral sex. You are not keen on fellatio with elephants, so you say, *I need nitro.*

Your technician is taking your blood pressure. She consults. Apparently, you are not at your target heart rate yet.

I'm getting off, you say and make moves.

They stop the treadmill. Your angina has eclipsed everything. It is one of the worst episodes you can remember; you spray nitro and let them lead you to a gurney. You lie still as a corpse waiting it out. It is the pain of myocardial infarction. You breathe in a calculated way.

The doctor appears above you, singing your name.

Mrs. Williams, he says, *how old are you when did you have the heart attack I bet it didn't get diagnosed right away did it were you diagnosed Mrs. Williams or were you sent home from the hospital huh?*

Crack open an eye. Through your misery of pain say, *I have some tinker toys you might enjoy playing with instead of my mind.*

Because your heart rate has been recalcitrant, they have to administer a drug called Persantine, which dilates the vessels of your heart in much the same way as exercise, and then administer another dose of MIBI. This is so they can compare where the dye settles inside you both at rest, earlier, and now, during stress. This drug makes you dizzy. You can't get your head on straight. You feel woozy and as stupid as Mr. Christmas. The team sends you out into the hallway and makes you sit and sit to see if it will pass; when it doesn't, they administer an emergency antidote.

That night, safely at home cooking grilled cheese sandwiches for your youngest daughter and a tofu burger for your eldest, you scratch. Mostly your belly, that soft, full bulge under your jeans. You undo your zipper and go at it with more pep than you've shown in years. You turn the burners off because, in fact, it appears that you need to concentrate, that you need to apply double-handed focus here. And now that you think of it, it's not only your belly that's itchy. So are your feet and the palms of your hands. Your crotch and armpits. Inside your ears. Your legs and your arms. Your back. Grab a wooden spoon and cram it down the back of your shirt.

You yank up your top; you push down your jeans. Your GP confirms an allergy. Every inch of your body is covered with a rash. It used to be raised and red, but now it's blushed purple, like a bruise. Your GP explains that your blood vessels have squirted blood out just under your skin. That's why you look like an alien. She tells you you're in the midst of an adverse drug reaction to Persantine, and prescribes massive doses of prednisone.

Sometimes these reactions can last more than a year, she says.

Large sores erupt on your skin and then ooze, refusing to heal. For a solid month, you scratch. You try lying in a bathtub filled with water and oatmeal. You try calamine lotion. You try cutting your nails to the quick. But nothing begins to soothe you. You can't sleep. You jolt awake tearing your skin from your bones. You stumble around your house weeping.

The steroids make your face blow up like a chipmunk hoarding nuts in its cheeks. The steroids give you a lovely black moustache and beard, the envy of your children and boyfriend. The steroids give you a Notre

Dame hump. The steroids make you ravenous—you'd welcome an elephant sitting on your face now; you'd eat it. In a month, you gain thirty pounds, blown up like a condom, a surgical glove, a balloon.

And then, quietly, slowly, you stop scratching. Of course you never lose the weight. Instead, you lose your periods and start getting hot flashes.

Gird yourself for open heart surgery. Think of a nutcracker; consider the sound of a nutcracker cracking a nut. Watch the shell shatter; splinters dust the countertop. Now imagine the sound of your ribs cracking.

How many ribs could a rib cracker crack if a rib cracker could crack ribs?

The lipid results are in. Your bad cholesterol is high and your good cholesterol is low, but nothing that consuming a diet exclusively of spinach day in and day out for the rest of your life won't cure. Your MIBI results are in: there's nothing new awry with your heart. In fact, collateral vessels are probably taking up some of your lost blood flow, so that, in actuality, you're a little healthier than a decade ago.

The cardiologist turns his bland face towards you, sounding utterly bored. You don't need revascularization, he says. You don't need a diagnostic angiogram.

You have been building up your courage for months. You sit beside his desk feeling completely numb. *What about all the angina?* you finally ask.

Well, he says, *it obviously* wasn't *angina.*

What?

I'm an expert in angina and obviously, you weren't having it. Not possible with these MIBI results.

Yes, I was. You are almost in tears. You watch your 30,000 expert experiences with angina fly out his window like knick-knacks in a hurricane!

Half my job is helping patients distinguish when they're having angina, he says.

I had angina, you say. Belligerently.

And as far as the allergy you describe, also impossible. You need a large protein for a serum reaction, and Persantine just doesn't have one. He takes a break while he squares papers on his desk, then looks up at you as if surprised to discover you're still there, pestering him. He's found you out, hasn't he? You're a bad little girl who wants to pretend she's sick to get attention. He has your number. He says, *Is there anything further I can help you with?*

You wean yourself, slowly, off your beta blockers, taking them down to the dose you started with before your doctor upped them.

Correspondingly, your angina levels fall off. When at last you attain your original dose, concurrently with attaining your original anginal levels, you realise the angina was likely caused by the drugs. Was probably a dose-related adverse effect. Indeed, when you research this, medical texts tell you it's more than possible. The crescendo angina was caused by spasms, brought on by what was, for your body, an overdose.

Was completely iatrogenic.

Understanding will bloom in the blink of an eye. You're like a house after a storm. The lights flicker and come back on. In the basement, the furnace growls, sputters and sends up plumes of heat The shutters re-attach themselves to their hinges. Roof shingles jump back in place. You're forty-one, overweight and peripausal. But you're not going to die this time. Your kids are going to go on demanding Pizza Pops and bulgur wheat and pretending they don't know you; in bed, your boyfriend, who stuck it all out, is going to keep getting a ridiculous number of erections. Even your cat, who in people years is seventy, will remain in the sway of her oral fixation. Every so often Gail, that ex-friend, will drop you a line about Emilia the poet. Gail herself might be coming to Vancouver. How would you like a visitor?

The Memory Theatre of Guilio Camillo

Anne Simpson

Every afternoon Robin read to him. Larry was an irritable old man who suffered from diabetes. His sight became worse for a while, then better, then worse again. Now he could hardly see. Since she moved back to Dartmouth, she'd been living in his basement in exchange for doing the cooking and a few hours of reading each day. It worked out to her benefit. She planned to make a lot of money bartending at Gary's Great Steaks and then go to France in the fall.

She had no idea she'd enjoy it, reading for a while and then watching Larry work, pasting his little bits of coloured paper or newsprint onto pieces of stiff white paper. He would ask her where he was putting a ripped bit of blue which he wanted in the lower left corner. She would tell him to move it a bit to the right, so he would skate it further right with the glue leaving a milky track. Then he would cover the glue with a piece of gum wrapper, ripped in half. He sold his collages in New York. People compared him to Karl Schwitters, the German Dada artist. But he wasn't Karl Schwitters and he didn't care what Karl Schwitters had done. He was going to die soon. He didn't have time to do all the things he wanted to do. Somewhere along the way, time had been wasted.

" 'It has been asserted that the daughter of Decimus, known as Lydia, was versed in the arts of memory, to the extent that she—' " Robin put down the book she was reading and unwrapped a piece of gum.

"She what?" asked Larry.

"Um, just a sec." Robin folded the gum and put it in her mouth. "OK, where was I?—'to the extent that she could recite Virgil backwards, line by line, for which she was accorded great respect, since this skill was deemed remarkable in a woman. Yet this was the least of her accomplishments, for it was also asserted that she had devised a method of improving the memory, one of the several arts of rhetoric.' "

"*Inventio, dispositio, elocutio, pronuntiatio, memoria*," murmured Larry.

"What?"

"The five parts of rhetoric," he said. "Of which memory is the treasure house."

"Oh," said Robin. She made a smacking sound with the gum. "Want me to go on?"

"Mmmhmm."

" 'Lydia inferred that those desiring to improve the memory should select mental images to signify the things themselves, and so arrange these images within an enclosure, easily grasped by the memory, such as a house—' " Robin paused. "God, how can you stand this stuff?"

"Go on."

"I think someone should have given Lydia a dollhouse when she was a kid."

Robin didn't always go down to her apartment after she came in from work. Occasionally she'd go up to Larry's studio, because she knew he'd be asleep, and anyway she just wanted to look. None of his collages were hanging on the walls; they were stacked against it. One had swaths of gouache colour over an article about the proper way to set a table; one was scraped and torn to reveal an image of a man diving into pavement; another consisted of a series of photographs of the Statue of Liberty, seen from the balcony that circled the statue's tiara, giving the effect of vertigo. There was a playfulness in his work. But it wasn't the collages that she was interested in, so much as the small constructions on the studio floor. One was a wire house, with wire people, another was a wooden bowl lined with nails, and the third was a perfect reproduction of a skull with a handle on one side. She picked it up and turned it over. Inside, the skull was studded with tiny mirrors.

She went to the work table and picked up a piece of brilliant red paper. She ripped it experimentally and glued it onto a sheet of white bond paper. It was an interesting shape; an isosceles triangle. There were other bits of paper on the table. She glued on a piece of green, a string, a bit of foil. She began humming a blues song, laid down a piece of purple velvet, discarded it, and kept humming.

"Hmmmm, hmmmm, I feel so good, hmmmm, hmmmm, whenever I see you. Hmmmmmmm. Yes, I feel so good, hmmmm—"

She held up the finished collage, studying it. It wasn't a bad effort.

Robin was reading to Larry from a battered paperback that she'd picked up at Mr Boone's Book Bargains for fifty cents. It was a book of love letters.

" 'Honey, you're my angel, my real angel man. I dreamed I saw you at the Stop and Hop under the strobe light. I could see all the little twinkly lights on your face as we slow danced to "Love Me Tender." Honey man,

I wish I could sit in your lap and you could—' "

"Stop," Larry said, tearing a piece from a Life magazine cover. "Read me something else."

"Why?" she asked. "Aren't you the slightest bit interested in other people?"

"I don't need to hear about their goddamn love lives."

"Why not?"

"It's poking in where you're not wanted."

"But it's only natural to want to—"

"No it isn't. I wouldn't want it."

"Because you're afraid they'd find out too much?"

"What's to find out?" he asked, and went back to putting a piece of orange felt on the left side of his collage. He worked at it for a while, his tongue just visible at the corner of his mouth. Then he turned the collage on its side, upside down, right side up—peering at it. "Anyway, it was a long time ago," he went on absently. "I loved her more than she ever loved me."

"Maybe she did love you."

He snorted. "She left."

Robin fingered the pages of the book.

"I've got a lover," she said. "His name's Greg."

"That's good."

"I haven't seen him for about eight months but he's still very committed to me. He's in Belize."

"Dealing drugs."

"Working for Children's World International."

"In bed with someone different every night of the week."

"No, he's not like that. He's very—well, it's just not something he'd do."

"Ah," he said, pasting on a bit of gold doiley, "then it's obviously love."

She didn't like him. As she was walking to work one May evening it occurred to her that Larry was an irascible old bugger. She could easily come to hate him. Under a canopy of white pear blossoms she reached up her hand to break off a snowy flower. What did he know about anything? Love, for instance? A tanned boy on a mountain bike made a wide arc around her to avoid a collision. She had stepped off the curb without looking. She'd been thinking of Greg. He hadn't written in a few weeks, except to say that he and a woman called Trina had started raising funds for an rural education project. Trina was a Vajrayana Buddhist; he'd never met anyone quite like her. She played the mandolin.

"Shit," said Robin. She began picking the silky petals off the pear blossom and let them drift from her fingers. They were tiny curls of white,

tender as ear lobes, or an eyelid, closed.

She was reading a new book Larry had chosen, one which she didn't much like. There was a faint smell of urine in the room. She wrinkled her nose.

" 'Guilio Camillo's invention appears to have been greatly influenced by the cabalist tradition, and it owes a debt to the *Ars memorativa* treatises—' "

"Why are you stopping?"

"I don't really understand it."

"Well, I do. Keep going, please," he said, sharply. He tried to pour himself some water from the jug, but it spilled on the table. Robin mopped it up.

"D' you want me to read the footnote?"

"Yes."

"All right," she sighed. "It's from a letter written in 1532. 'The theatre is wondrous large, and indeed, the author of the work, one Julius Camillus, entered into it and I followed hard upon his heels. I stood in awe of this edifice of wisdom, and all the while Master Camillus, whose Latin is in some degree imperfect and marred by digressions into the vernacular, hastened to reveal its secrets to me. The construction, which I do take the liberty of describing, is of wood, coloured with many images of the antique gods—' "

"Don't read so fast."

Robin made a face and continued, more slowly, in a monotone.

" 'It is very like a small amphitheatre, excepting that it is not large enough to admit more than two people, and where it mounts on ascending grades, it is full of ornamented boxes or cabinets, which may be removed. At the edge of the stage, at certain intervals, are seven pillars, the which are Solomon's Seven Pillars of Wisdom. I stood fixed upon the stage, gazing with amazement as Master Camillus did elaborate to me his theatre of the memory.' "

"Ah, it's fantastic," said Larry. "What does it say about the footnote? Who wrote it?"

"Somebody called Petrus Regius wrote this to Erasmus."

Larry stood up from the table, knocking his empty plastic glass and some coloured bits of paper to the floor. He picked up his cane and began to limp around the room, before going to the bathroom again, the fifth time that afternoon. When he came back he spoke decisively.

"I'll need your help," he said.

"For what?"

"I'm going to make a memory theatre."

Robin explained that the deal had been she'd just read to him, which

she didn't mind doing, but she wasn't just going to fritter away her time making models of some old theatre. She wasn't an artist.

He ripped up a page of *The New Yorker* as she talked, tearing it into tiny pieces. He lifted his hands, filled with the papers, and let them fall through his fingers onto the table. He did this several times. She paused, intrigued by the grace of his old hands.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making something."

"No, you're not."

"All these little papers," he said, "replete with their meanings. Look at them. This is what I do: I take things and make them into something else. Most people think it's unimportant, insignificant." He grunted. "Maybe so."

She was transfixed by the little papers, some falling to the floor, some still in the air, like snow.

"Your mother thought it was a waste of time," he said.

"Did she?"

"Oh yes, though she never said as much."

She bent to pick up the scattered bits of paper.

"I need your help," he said.

He had taught her how to draw when she was a child. At that stage in his life he taught science to high school students; he drew in order to observe the natural world in greater detail, as he told her. She intuited that it was because he didn't like to be at home, where her mother would ask him to do chores. His lessons were always well meant, but somehow he would want her to draw exactly as he himself drew: quickly, exquisitely, with certain things labelled in small printed letters. They would look at an elm tree together, of which there were still some in town, and he would point out the slightly asymmetrical crown, the intertwining branches which diminished into small, fingering branches. Robin would be aware of the elm tree's intricacies but it would still be impossible to draw. She would sit with her pencil hovering over a smooth sheet of blank paper, without knowing how to start. He would help her get started, by drawing a swift line to represent the trunk, and then he would go back to his own drawing. Robin would stare at the one miraculous line, put her sketch pad to one side and take out the sandwiches which should have been saved until lunch. Her father would continue drawing, unperturbed, the tip of his tongue showing at the side of his mouth. She would wander across to the brook with the sandwich, sit below the bank where he couldn't see her and skip stones over the water. The taste of peanut butter in the sandwich would always be slightly sour, slightly metallic, as if it were the taste of her small, accumulated failures.

They began work on a small model of the memory theatre. There were fiddly little bits of wood to glue onto the frame. It didn't look like much to Robin, even as they worked on it day after day. It resembled a bird house. And Larry could never see what he was doing, so he would put a sticky bit of wood onto a section that was already finished. She would have to guide his hand as it hesitated in the air. It was like working with a three-year old.

"Did you always do stuff like this?" she asked.

"What?" He was trying to put a thin line of glue on a delicate bit of balsam wood.

"I mean when you were little—did you always do this sort of thing, or what?"

He had gotten some of the glue on his t-shirt. There was a dribble of glue along the length of his thumb.

"I remember doing things when I had rheumatic fever. Aunt Mary gave me a set of watercolour paints."

"So what did you paint?"

"Oh, nothing at first. Just blobs of colour. But I was fascinated by the colour. I thought, this is red, this rich, wild, wonderful colour is red. And this one is green, this swirl, this leafy dark colour is green. And yellow, so vivid, just a touch of it." He put down the bit of wood he was working on.

"I was dabbling with my colours and I heard someone's voice in the garden—Aunt Mary—and I thought, her voice just then, the way she exclaimed over the roses, that was yellow. That was bright yellow."

Robin wiped the glue from his thumb with a tissue.

"What about my voice?" she asked. "What colour would you say it is?"

"Mmm," he mused. "I would say a sort of lavender colour, maybe bluish, mauve—it changes."

"And what about your own voice?" said Robin, animated, enjoying herself.

"Well, that's a different thing. I think the colour has gone out of it. I think it's grey, not even really a charcoal grey. Just grey."

One morning just before lunch, Robin saw a silvery-blue Renault pull into the driveway. She was making herself some toast, staring absently out the kitchen window in the basement apartment. The Renault drew up so that one of the tires was on the grass. The car obstructed Robin's view. A woman emerged, imprisoning the hem of her long navy skirt as she shut the car door. She opened it, made a clucking noise over the grease on her skirt, and slammed it shut. She was a tall woman, with short grey hair that had been blonde once. The navy and white silk scarf at her neck could have been a Liberty. She wore elegant navy sandals.

What could be seen of her legs bore the spidery blue signature of varicose veins. As she walked towards the front steps, her face and neck vanished, then her chest and the gold buttons of her short-sleeved white blouse. All that was left were the pale legs, the hem of the navy skirt, and the sandals. She rang the doorbell, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. The sandals went down a step. They came up a step. The doorbell rang again, with a drilling sound. Robin could hear the thumping of Larry's cane and the sound of keys falling off a table. The door opened and there was a garble of voices.

"Hello, Larry."

"My Lord, Karina, I never thought you'd—"

The navy sandals disappeared.

Robin sat down at the kitchen table. The toast, on the plate before her, was cold. She pushed it away and poured herself a glass of apple juice, sliding it in a circle on the fake wood surface of the table. After a few minutes, she got up and began to scrub the kitchen sink vigorously with a bleach cleanser, working hard at the ring around the drain. When she paused, there was still no sound from upstairs. She put down the sponge, washed her hands, and went upstairs, moving quietly, careful to keep close to the wall, so that the floorboards wouldn't creak. A white cardboard box was sitting on the counter in the kitchen. It was tied with blue and silver ribbons, which cascaded in curly ends over the side of the box. From behind the counter, Robin could see into the living room, where the two of them were sitting on the green and white striped sofa, close together. The woman was taking off her father's Coke-bottle glasses. He blinked. His face had a pinkish tint; his expression was owlish. He was not a handsome man. The woman leaned over and embraced him. He seemed bewildered for a moment. Then he clutched at her shoulders and kissed her mouth—greedily—her eyes, her neck; moving the fabric of her navy skirt at the same time, so that he could put his hands on her thighs.

Robin backed away. She went quickly along the hall and descended into the basement. The smell of bleach enveloped her. She sat down on the faded red kitchen chair, with the rip in the middle of the vinyl seat, where the stuffing had begun to come out, and put her hands flat on the table to stop them from trembling.

She rifled through some bits of paper on the work table. One or two had fallen into the half-finished model of the memory theatre. She fished one out: "Your lovel—" She looked at another: "—ng for a chance to—" For a while she pondered them, hesitated, and put the feathery pieces back. Larry was coming down the hall, his cane mapping the way on the hardwood floor.

"You're here," he said.

"So?"

"Trying to read what I've written?"

"I couldn't—you tore everything up."

"Serves you right. Anyway, those were old letters."

"You still love her."

He moved over to a chair, nearly tripping on the rug, and sat down heavily. He took off his glasses and put them on the chair next to him.

"Who?"

"Karina, or whoever she is."

"Ah. I doubt if she'll come back. I explained to her what happens to a diabetic: excessive thirst, screwed-up bladder, hypo attacks, blindness, utter dependency."

"You won't even say her name but you still love her."

He looked at her, straight at her face, as if he could see her.

"Of course I do."

"And I suppose you and she were carrying on even before Mum left."

"No. I loved your mother. We were different people altogether, but I loved her."

He bent forward, about to rise. " 'There is a purity and a sweetness in all things, a silence—' Do you know who said that?"

Robin didn't look at him.

"Thomas Merton," he went on. "A Trappist monk. I have no idea if he was in love with anyone, though I suspect he was at one time in his life, but the thing is that he said it perfectly. What can anyone say about love? Nothing, really. It's there—yes—a little wordless thing you think about, and keep thinking about until you can't stand it anymore, and yet you want to hang onto it at all costs. Then after a while it becomes something else. There is a purity, a sweetness to it."

Greg finally sent Robin a letter. On the envelope was a stamp with a picture of a creamy beach, a golden palm. The letter was brief, almost brusque. It was time they both moved on to other things, he wrote. He had felt this for a long time. He didn't want to hurt her; she would always be important in his life. But he'd found something with Trina. When he came back to New Hampshire, Trina would be coming to live with him.

Robin picked up the nearest thing to hand, which happened to be a small blue teapot. She flung it against the wall, where it smashed, satisfyingly, into little blue shards.

"Fuck you," she said.

Larry was drinking Scotch, which he knew he shouldn't drink. Robin had a glass of Chardonnay.

"No, no," Larry was saying, "it goes back well before Plato to an

Egyptian called Hermes Trismegistus. He wrote the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a sacred book of wisdom, which was translated into Latin just in time to make it fashionable during the Renaissance. It was New Age stuff. Trismegistus gave an account of creation, except that in his case man is created like God, with precisely the same creative power."

"But what does this have to do with Camillo's memory theatre?"

"Well, Camillo was fashioning a little world with his memory theatre, using these occult concepts of creation. It was overlaid with Christianity, but there was this other subversive notion behind it—that men were gods. He included everything from the terrestrial to the celestial. The elements, the emotions, the planets, the angels. It was filled with inscriptions, images, little drawers filled with messages."

"It still sounds like a kind of filing cabinet."

"Oh, but you're missing the point." Larry made a circular motion with his glass and drank the last of it. "The memory theatre is the mind—the mind of man inspired by the Mind of God. Camillo could walk around this theatre he'd created and be inside the Divine Mind. Or that's what he said."

"It's a nice idea."

"Mmmn. That's what the King of France thought. Though it's anyone's guess whether his memory improved after he saw it."

Robin put her glass down on the table. She rubbed her temples.

"You have to see it as a vision of the world as it could be, with all the possibilities for creativity," he said. "I don't necessarily see it as a construct, myself."

"How do you see it?"

"Without a frame. I see the mind, infinitely configured in galaxies; one galaxy on another. I imagine it going on and on, spacious, mysterious; one thought circling around another thought into nothingness. That's how I see it. The whole thing is beguiling, divine, endless."

In the end Larry hired a night nurse. She changed his sheets when he soaked them during his hypo attacks. She gave him the insulin injections. Her name was Mandy, and on Robin's nights off from waitressing they watched "Star Trek." Mandy liked to knit baby blankets. She was knitting one in soft yellow with scalloped edges for her one-month old niece.

"You're a lot like your dad," pronounced Mandy. "I mean, you're an artist, too, aren't you?"

"Well, I don't know."

"What I say is, if you've got the gift to do something, you've got to do it. My Al, now, he's got a talent for cars. He can take them apart and put them back together faster than a wet dog can shake." She chuckled.

"I can't tell a piston from a spark plug myself."

Robin sat in front of the television after Mandy had gone upstairs to check on her father. The news had finished, Johnny Carson had come on. She switched it off. She remembered once, when her mother had taken her shopping in Durham, she had gotten lost. She went into the Ladies' Room and cried. In the three-way mirror—a gaudy, gold-edged splendour—the anguish in her childish face was exaggerated. She could see, not one self, but hundreds, all standing one behind the other. She stopped crying. She moved her right hand and the thousand selves in identical blue smocked dresses raised their right hands. She shook her head and her braids flipped up, as did thousands of other be-ribboned braids. She swayed gracefully from side to side and the selves swayed with her, a snake of girls. It struck her that she had enormous power, newly-discovered magic, which only she could wield. So little was required of her. The movement of her head, her hand. That was all.

She continued to add to the memory theatre, off and on, for a couple of years, even after Larry was confined to his bed. She would run her hand over the side of the amphitheatre, the little dowels that represented Solomon's seven pillars of wisdom, the tiny images she had painted of the angels. Once she mentioned to Larry that she was still working on it, and he asked her why. She didn't need to work on it anymore.

But the little amphitheatre cradled something of him she didn't want to lose, a delicate wooden husk of all the hours they'd spent making it. There were mistakes, like the drawers that were not expertly crafted, a frame that was a little warped. Robin's measurements had been less than exact. She lifted the whole thing up in the air, tentatively. She put it down. It was all she would have left of him; the fine, flawed model of his own mind.

"You're afraid," he said to her.

The light was streaming across his bed. She took his yellow hand in hers. Whenever she saw him now, his hands were useless, flat on the covers or under the sheet, maybe crossed over his chest. She couldn't stand to look at them.

"There's no reason to be."

She made a little sound; not a grunt, not a cry.

"I love you," he said. His hand moved against her palm. "You know that."

She bent her head down, right down on the quilt, so that it touched his shoulder. She felt his hand on her head, stroking her hair.

Once Robin saw Greg in a hardware store. He lived at Tuttle's Crossing, twenty miles away, ever since Trina had gone back to Seattle. He

had a package of Christmas lights under one arm. He didn't see her. Scratching his head thoughtfully, he picked up a bell covered with silver sparkles, put it down and moved down the aisle. Then he put the Christmas lights back on a shelf. He was slightly thicker around the waist than she remembered. After Trina left, he'd written Robin a note saying that he'd been an idiot and he'd always been in love with her. Couldn't they meet for a coffee or something, just to talk? There was a picture of a sleeping grey cat on the front of the notecard, and it was almost a pity to crumple it up. She didn't want to talk.

She bought a Christmas tree stand and left the store, carefully crossing the icy parking lot. She sat in her car for a long time, noticing that the last of the afternoon sunlight had gilded the windows of the Episcopalian church. She looked at the elm trees by the gas station, which would probably be cut down in the spring. They spread out generously, like fan vaulting in a cathedral, ending in a tracery of smaller branches against the cold, rosy sky. She remembered what her father had said about silence. She remembered his hands moving across the collages, searching like moles; his blind hands touching Karina's face with abandon, with tenderness, finding her again.

After her father died, Robin sat at the work table for an hour or two each day, fiddling with bits of paper, some dowelling, tubes of paint. What could she do? It was clear that she didn't have any great ideas, unlike Larry, who used to talk a blue streak about all the things he wanted to do. He'd been famous, which irked him. And now Chicago wanted to do a retrospective, and the dealers in New York had told her that his unsold collages were a virtual gold mine, if they just sat on them for six months. It didn't mean anything to her. She just missed him. They were more alike than she'd realised. If she could just sustain him somehow; if she could just retain what she remembered of him. If she were careful she wouldn't lose a thing. She pushed back her chair and walked to the window, to look at the light on the snow, at the mauve-grey shadows of a blue spruce on a lip of pure white drift. No, she was bound to lose something. He would drift away in bits, like his little scraps of ripped paper. Like a fine dusting of ashes. She began wrapping some twine around a dowel. It didn't matter what she made. Or whether anything turned out. She finished wrapping the dowel and knotted the twine, laying it on the table between her hands. The veins stood out faintly blue under her waxy skin. She turned her hands over. Once her father had taken her hands and laid them out flat on the dining room table, perhaps to see if she had washed them properly. But he didn't say anything. He just studied them. Then he told her that hands were beautiful, very beautiful. And the space between hands, too, he went on, and paused—holding her hands up—was also beautiful. Did she see what he meant?

She held up her hands in front of the window with the tips of her fingers barely touching. It was a remarkable shape, a construct, a theatre; each finger a supple bridge, spanning an enclosed space. She turned her hands this way and that, considering the light on her fingernails, on her knuckles. Gradually she moved her fingers apart, though the base of her palms still touched, observing the way the light informed each hummock, each line on her palms, crossing over tinier lines, lines that she couldn't see, deep in the flesh, that went on and on crossing and re-crossing, infinite as memory.

The Rainy Season

Jean McNeil

At first she thinks she is in a kitchen. Light slices at her with knife-like precision from sharp white surfaces. She swims through a brownish liquid she vaguely suspects is her own blood. It is thick and soupy, her arms as limp as noodles. She keeps on swimming toward the light.

"Welcome back to consciousness." The voice comes from the end of the tunnel, where the knives of light are waiting to cut her up.

"Check her temperature," the voice says again. She raises her hand to her head. When she draws it away it is coated with the glycerine-like sheen of her own sweat.

The voice speaks again, and this time it harbours a smile.

"We should call you Mosquito," it says. "Look at those legs."

She had red blotches on her white skin almost the minute she arrived. Mosquitoes, it seemed, could smell fresh meat just flown in from the northern latitudes, pale and muscular and ripe as a grape.

They sped down the highway at sunrise, five-thirty a.m. She watched the pink clouds of a tropical sunrise troop along the red rim of Guanabara Bay.

In the airport, she hadn't recognised him when he had approached her. She was aware that the man in front of her bore a faint resemblance to the friend she had last seen three years ago, but she wondered all the same why this strange man was hovering around her. His face was full, puffed out. His stomach hung over his trousers.

She put her hand to her mouth.

"Your beard," she said, and trailed off. In three years, he had completely transformed himself.

"Shaved it off two years ago. *As moradoras das cavernas,"* he said, pointing to her arms. Cave dwellers. Her skin was very white. She laughed. It was the first time she had heard him speak Portuguese.

"I'll give you the dawn tour," he said. As he drove her around the city she lost all sense of direction. They hurtled through tunnels that looked like Space Station Earth—tiny round lights polka-dotting caverns that had been blasted through the mountains. She looked up at the fantastic

shapes of the jutting peaks that surrounded the city. She had seen plenty of pictures, but they had not prepared her for the sheer absurdity of the landscape.

"They look like they've been made from meringue," she said, thinking of whipped peaks of egg whites standing stiff and contorted in the mixing bowl.

At the market they bought fruit she had never heard of—Amazonian fruits from the winterless north with bird-twitter names: *Açai, cupuacú.* The seasons were reversed, the autumnal pears, thick and yellow, were being unloaded from Argentina and Uruguay. The southern hemisphere had just slipped over the cusp toward winter.

He strode around, insanely animated for six o'clock in the morning, arguing about price, shouting in his garrulous American-accented Portuguese. She was overdressed for the climate and already sweating. Everyone in the market crush around her wore shorts and flip-flops. Soon bulging bags of fruit hung off her arms.

When they were back in the car he lit a cigarette.

"I forgot to tell you," he turned to her. "We have another guest." He drew a thick breath of tobacco into his lungs and shoved the car into gear. "He called me last week without any warning. But don't worry, our rooms are allocated on a first come, first serve basis and we knew you were coming a long time ago. At the moment he's staying in your room but I've asked him to move out to the one next door."

Why, she wondered, was he talking like the concierge of a hotel? She knew they had a big apartment; four spare rooms. But they were friends of seven years' standing, not her hotel. She looked at him, trying to discern whether the physical change embodied in his now Churchill-esque profile reflected some kind of interior change as well.

They headed out onto the highway, him driving with a newly acquired recklessness.

"We put up a lot of people. BBC crews, too. Everybody knows we have a huge place." He stubbed out his cigarette. "But at this point we only have Michel," he said.

She nodded and looked out the window at the clumps of pre-dawn workers gathering around bus stops like sleek African eland at watering wells.

"A very good-looking Frenchman," he volunteered.

The first night she ran for an hour. Drenched in sweat, she encountered him on the doorstep to the apartment.

"T'as couru?" He was on his way out. His hair was damp, and he smelled of cologne. She had forgotten there were men who used cologne.

She nodded and smiled through her sweat.

"Oui, mais l'humidité m'énerve. Je ne peux pas courir très bien."

Although they had spoken Portuguese when they had all had breakfast together that morning, they had immediately begun speaking French between themselves. She had dispensed with the *vous* within fifteen minutes. She had been the first to use the *tu,* and it was there between them now, non-negotiable, rushed, showing her to be the inexperienced young just-graduated student she was.

"What do you do?" he had asked her.

"I'm a linguist."

He nodded, sagely.

"What do you do?" she asked in turn.

"I used to own a hotel, after I got out of gold."

"Gold?"

"I was a miner," he elaborated. *"No interior,"* he said, switching to Portuguese and wagging his head in direction toward the massive northwest of the country.

She studied his face, lit by the streetlights above. It was more creased than it ought to have been for a man in his early thirties, she thought. He had the look of someone who has spent a long time in the sun. His face was quite symmetrical, attractive, but it was marred by his nose, inelegantly squished in a game of rugby, he had said, in the days when he had been a rugby player.

"Right now," he continued, "my ex-partner is trying to buy me out. I'm staying here in Rio while the negotiations go through."

"And then what will you do?"

He shrugged. "Go back to France. Perhaps back to Amazonia. I have a girlfriend in Argentina; I could go there. But," he tried to smile, but it instantly drooped like a disappointed prick into an expression of disapproval, "she doesn't love me anymore."

Something occurred to her, independent of the information he had given. He's broke, she thought. And stuck here.

This had all been in French. She was surprised how rickety hers was—it had been years since she had spoken the language on a daily basis. She made a note to ask him, politely, if they could speak Portuguese. But at the same time she knew they would carry on in French, and this seemed to mean something.

"Toilet paper," Jack said, holding up a roll before stuffing it in his bag. "The only thing you really can't go to the Amazon without." He threw his malaria prophylactics from the case to where they landed, rejected, on the bed.

"Aren't you going to take those?" At university she had been told horror stories about anthropologists who had contracted deadly

cerebral malaria.

"The best way to avoid malaria is not to get bitten." Jack lit a cigarette. "Stay in between five and seven in the morning and evening and wear long trousers and sleeves and you'll be fine. Those pills only make you go blind."

She looked down at her own welt-dotted legs.

"I'll probably get Dengue fever," she said.

He shut his case. "I've never heard of any foreigner getting Dengue in Rio. Like most things, you only get it if you're poor."

"So where will you be going?"

"No final do mundo," he joked. The end of the world. "I'm sorry I can't take you with me, but you know there's only one seat on the plane."

"That's okay," she said. She only half-believed him. "Good luck with those officials."

"Yeah," he snorted. "I suspect they're not really interested in talking to anyone about indigenous land rights. All they care about is who can sell them a satellite dish."

She had a vision of Amazonia from the air, dotted with satellite dishes like poisonous mushrooms sprouting on the forest floor.

"I love Amazonia," Jack said, and gave her a big, suffocating hug.

She went downstairs to where the taxi was waiting to see him off. Michel appeared suddenly, out of the night, to stand next to her.

"He's going already? I thought it was tomorrow."

"He had to get a flight out tonight."

"Oh yes," Michel fingered his tie. "It will take him at least twenty-four hours to get where he's going."

"You've been there?"

"I've been everywhere. I've been more godforsaken places than I care to remember, I tell you."

Jack struggled to get his bulk and luggage through the cab's back door. "Hey Michel," he yelled. "Be nice. Show her around."

"That's okay, Jack," she said, irritated. She was going to tell him she could take care of herself.

"Ana's back on Tuesday," he cut her off, yelling from the back seat of the cab. "Make sure to give her my love." Then the cab swallowed him up and he was gone.

In the elevator back up to the apartment, she caught Michel's eye in one of the mirrors that wrapped themselves around three sides of the cubicle. He avoided her gaze and looked beyond her, over her shoulder, to inspect another side of his reflected face.

When they entered the apartment he took off his tie and turned to her.

"So. Have you discovered *caipirinhas* yet?"

She shook her head.

"I'll make you one." Michel reached up to a high shelf and took down a bottle. "*Cachaça*," he illustrated, turning the label toward her.

"I can read," she protested.

"But do you know what it is?" He raised his Gallic eyebrows.

"No."

"Well, try some first." He took a pestle from the kitchen drawer and proceeded to crush lime slices. They he poured sugar on top of the lime, the alcohol on top of the mixture, and finally soda water and ice.

"This is a nice weak one for you," he said, gallantly. "You have to start off slow."

"I don't drink much."

"You will." He turned away, back to the cutting board. "You're in Brazil now. Here people drink, eat, go to the beach, have sex. Here people know how to live." He quartered another lime. "Unlike you Anglo-Saxons, Brazilians actually know how to enjoy the sensuous life. I know, believe me." He turned to her, where she was gulping her drink. "I've lived here ten years. I'm almost Brazilian myself. But then it was not such a difficult transition for me."

She looked at him over the rim of her glass. "Why is that?"

He turned back to his drink-making, and his lips drooped again. "Because I am a Mediterranean," he shrugged.

Later, he put on a Tropicalia compilation record at full volume, and they danced.

"You have no sensuality in your body," he told her, scanning her limbs. "Look at the way you move."

"I like the way I move." She looked down at her body as if it had somehow betrayed her. She was muscular and fit. She liked tension and containment and the asexual sinuosity she occasionally observed in dancers and tennis players. And in herself. Her dancing usually attracted people, she thought. *She* usually attracted people.

But he shook his head. "You move like a man," he said.

"That's me in the *drague*," he said, pointing to one of the photographs that documented his life, or what had until recently been his life. In the photograph he indicated, the river was dotted with amphibious hulks, prehistoric heaps of tin and machinery, each of them dredging the silty bottom for gold. There was another photo of the Cessna he owned. Another one showed him on Copacabana beach, his unlined face set in a Mr. Universe *moue,* his upturned thumb and red, well-filled bikini jutting out in arrogant three dimensional splendour from the photograph's narrow planes.

The next day they went to the beach together. As they laid their

towels down on the strip of sand in front of the Hotel Meridien, she smelled the stench of sewage drifting off the water. He wrinkled his nose. She saw his meek disapproval, as if surveying some woman's stomach that stuck out just an inch above her bikini bottom, or a suit whose cut was just slightly unimaginative. There was something very French about his expression, just then.

She was aware of a faint frequency of disturbance as they laid down their towels, as if there were people on the beach who were noticing their arrival and for whom it meant something. *Garimpeiros*—gold miners—were responsible for the hounding of indigenous people, false and hyperinflated local economies, drunkenness and prostitution, not to mention clear-cutting and environmental damage. Last year they had gone into the Yanomami Park in Roraima and massacred seven native people. At university she had come to equate the word *garimpeiro* with evil. Now she was laying next to one on Copacabana beach.

One of the drink sellers who paraded up and down the beach in endless revolutions approached them. A man-woman—it was impossible to discern the gender, as the face had been caved in and the skin dark and pitted, more like a hide than a human's.

"Hi," she or he said.

Michel introduced them.

"You his girlfriend?" So it was a she.

"No."

"She's had a very hard life," he said when she had moved off down the beach. "I talk to her when I come here. So nice," he said, lying back down on his towel, "but so ugly."

She got up to go back to the apartment so she could walk Ana and Jack's dog, as she had promised to do.

"They'll be so pleased to see you go," he squinted up at her.

"Who're they?"

"The prostitutes. They leave me alone now, though. I tell them I'm sad because my wife was killed in a car accident. So they don't try to hustle me. Some things they respect."

"And where do I fit in?" She rose and folded her towel. "Am I a friend of your dead wife?"

"Yes," he said, propping himself up on one elbow and looked up at her, using his free hand to shade his eyes. "You are an old friend of hers from France who is living here for awhile and I am consoling myself in your company." He said this as if he had already told the story of their friendship and how she was the only one who really understood him, she who had known his poor dead wife so well, who had been her friend.

She smiled, shaking out her towel.

"You shouldn't walk through the tunnel alone," he said, pointing to

the Tunel Novo between Princesa Isabel in Copacabana and the Rio Sul Shopping Centre. But nothing about the city that she had expected to frighten her did, now that she was here—not the violent crime, the snakes, the street kids, the transvestite prostitutes, the ferocious guard dogs who paced around the houses in the fashionable neighbourhood where Ana and Jack lived.

"A tout à l'heure," she said, moving off down the beach, watched, she knew, by several nameless eyes. The French friend of his dead wife, grieving with the sad husband. Maybe falling in bed together, locked in grief.

She looked up at the looming figure of the Meridien, from which delicate French-looking women exited and entered like moths to a lamp. She disapproved of his lies, of course, and felt them unnecessary. But at the same time she liked being a character in his story.

She could not remember such burning. Her abdomen was doing somersaults. A cauldron of liquid fire lived between her legs.

"The tyranny of ovulation," she thought, writhing on her bed. As soon as she had arrived, it hit her. Every fibre, every filament of her body was ripped to ragged strands, as if men with blunt knives were hacking at her.

The burning had started when they were running together on the *pista,* the jogging track by the sea, and he had asked her if she had a boyfriend.

"I've been too busy getting through graduate school to have a boyfriend. Besides," she added, "I don't care much for sex."

"I don't understand," he said, jogging beside her. "Explain to me how a young woman your age cannot like sex."

She shrugged. "It's got nothing to do with age. I need to be kept whole," she explained. "I don't have sex because it is an invasion. I have to hold myself together. It's just not worth the risk. To tell you the truth," she looked sideways at him, "I'd rather go running."

He was silent for a moment. Then he stopped running. She stopped too.

"In all my life," he said, slowly, incredulously, "that is one thing I have never had any woman say to me. That's just incredible."

And then his arm was around her neck in a kind of loose vice-grip.

"Do you want to be a man in bed?" he said. His voice was low and thick. Their French purred along on a new frequency. She gripped his arm and tried to pull it down.

"No," she laughed.

"I want to kick you for being so silly," he said, releasing her and pretending to kick her off the *pista*, over the edge to where the water churned. "Like a child," he said. And she laughed, because she wanted so badly to

be released from herself.

She wanted to be a child.

Clean, vaguely damp, sexless.

"And how are you feeling today?" The chrome tone of the doctor's voice has the brightness of refrigerators. It hurts her ears.

She opens her eyes, says: "Did you ever realise that the hunter has to spend his time watching the prey?—that he is trapped in his hunger?"

The doctor looks at her, flummoxed as a buffalo.

"I can't think of a duller fate," she says, closing her eyes again, "than to want all the time."

They charted the movements of each other at night on the huge wall map of South America, tracing their trajectories with their fingers. The National Geographic map of the continent splayed in its pregnant woman deformity on the wall. The Andes running down in a jagged and asymmetrical spine, too thin to support the distended stomach of Brazil. Once or twice her cheek brushed his hair. Rosario, he pointed. His French girlfriend, Dominique, was there, living on an *estancia.* He pointed to Fortaleza, a beach party-town in the northeast. His Brazilian girlfriend was there. She was twenty-two years old and he had promised her a trip to France. Within days of Michel's arrival in Rio, Jack had said, she was on the phone, begging for him, pleading for him, crying over him as only twenty-two year olds can do.

He showed her where Jack was, on the map. Then he followed the road he himself had driven many times when he still had his four-wheel drive. And then the Tapajós, catching her sleeve with its wide blue index finger.

"There," he said, placing his finger in the middle of nothingness. She waited, but no explanation came. She knew what his silence meant: that was the location of his past.

She dropped her eyes to see his arms, twice as thick as hers. He is as smooth as a sea anemone, she thought, and brown, as though panelled with mahogany or rosewood, those hard, red barks stripped from the rain forest. On the underneath of his forearms were networks of ropy veins that looked like the Amazon in summer—flooded with blood.

"That's the Solimões," she said, her finger hovering above the parchment of his forearm."That's the Tapajós." She pointed to where the brimming vein branched into two. He stood above her on the balcony, drinking in her cartographer's allusions. Unmoved, she could see.

He turned around and went inside, leaving her there with Corcovado and the statue of Christ the Redeemer, who spread his arms just to save her.

To save all of us, she thought, all of us trapped in the squalid entrails of this beautiful city.

"After you left," he told her, "she just came up to me."

She had a body of the kind he had told her he liked: big, sensual and tanned. They went out to a night club. Before they left, he came up to her.

"She wants to go to Marcel's," he said, naming an expensive night club in Leblon. "Can you loan me 10,000 *cruzeiros*?"

She gave him 15,000. As she handed over the money she felt something falling inside her. Whole pianos and other large heavy objects had gone hurtling through her abdomen.

"Qu'est-ce qu' il y a?" he said. She couldn't think of anything to say in French or Portuguese. She was tired of carrying on conversations in three different languages. She shook her head and put her hand on her stomach. He took her money and left.

Très experte, he told her over breakfast. She knew just what she had wanted, and how to ask for it. He did not intend to see her again. "I've got enough problems."

She looked around her at the breakfast table, which they had taken out to the balcony. The bread rolls, the coffee, the slices of *mamão*, the rhythm of their morning; two strangers, marooned together in the apartment of friends. Two strangers either banding together or fighting tooth and nail for supremacy.

Within the thick walls of the fever she sees Ana's face coming at her from a long way away. As soon as it gets close, she realises she wants to kiss her. But then she retreats with the waves that are moving the walls, the bed and the ceiling.

"So what have you been doing?" Ana asked, sitting on the balcony, nervous as ever. She could see that Ana wanted to jump up and start doing her expenses, even though she hadn't slept on the ten-hour flight from Chicago.

"Getting to know the city," she said. She was embarrassed. She had not done anything.

"So how are you getting around?"

"By taxi."

Ana smiled. She knew what Ana's smile meant: this was a version of residential snobbery entitled you-really-belong-when-you-know-the-bus-system.

"Here," Ana said, reaching into her pocket, "I've got something for you." She leaned over and handed her a small silver pendant, a fist

clenched in defiance—a charm from Bahia. "It's from Candomblé."

She thought: now I am well-warded against evil.

"When I make love to a woman, everything I do is for her," Michel explained. "I'm not interested in what I feel as a separate experience. What she feels gives me everything I need."

She had not felt the need in years. If I masturbate enough, she thought, I ought to be able to manage. And she went running, every evening, on the *pista*, with him.

"I've never had anything to do with an Anglo-Saxon," he elucidated. "I'm a Mediterranean, I prefer sensuality in a woman. Anglo-Saxons just do not attract me."

A week later she got her period. For the first time since she was twelve years old, she thought the blood was a haemorrhage. She was three weeks early.

"You have no idea," Ana said, turning to her, her eyes wide with the memory. "Ripping the curtains from the wall. Hurling furniture and crying underneath the bed. How am I supposed to deal with that? He's frustrated in his career, I'm doing better than him. But Jack's respected here, he does good work and there are people here who love him, who would do anything for him. I just don't understand." Her tone was a kind of fever; one of determination and rationality.

"I'm going to talk to him tomorrow when he gets back from the Amazon," she said, taking her glasses off and rubbing the lenses with the bottom of her shirt. She was always amazed at the nakedness of Ana's pale face without glasses. Her eyes, shorn of their chic Armani frames, were beautiful, berry brown; candid as almonds.

That night Michel made lamb—unusual for Brazil—with honey and mustard.

"You can cook," she said appreciatively, coming to stand beside him at the stove. He was sweating as he whisked his egg whites into thick relevance in the mixing bowl. "I'm French," he shrugged. "What do you expect?"

Ana went to the CD player and put on some classical music. She and Michel exchanged glances. No more Tropicalia. It was going to be different, they knew, from now on.

"A linguist, huh?" The voice comes to her from the bottom of what she realises is the bed.

It takes her some time to realise she is being spoken to. There is a clank of metal against metal as something is put back. Her chart.

"We see a lot of you guys in here."

She had taken her books with her as totems. They were to remind her of who she was in the dangerous and disorienting new culture. At first she read these books each night, after they had drunk their *caipirinhas* on the balcony and mused upon the sunset city.

Among the things she knew, through reading these totemic books, was that a new culture must be approached with caution—neither hurling oneself into the maelstrom nor standing back on the sidelines.

"In the view of the ancients, madness was allied to divinity," she read. "The mad were already closer to the gods than were the sane. They thus made an appropriate offering, one with which the gods could be expected to be pleased."

She broke off reading and looked at the photographs in the book she had brought with her. Faces smeared with ash. Fires. Effigies. Bloodletting. Sacrifice. All in the appeasement of the Gods, who loll in the luscious aphrodisiac realm of those who have their desires fulfilled.

"...the only means of compelling fate," she read on, "is to venture into those hazardous marginal areas where social norms cease to have any meaning, and where the protective laws and demands of the group no longer prevail; to go right to the frontiers of average, ordered living, to the breaking point of bodily strength and to the extremes of physical and moral suffering."

Outside the apartment, five floors below in the streets of the tropical city, men and women clad in only shorts, t-shirts and flip-flops eyed one another casually, with a completely non-Freudian acceptance of the sexual current passing underneath their regard. In Cinelandia, in the heart of the Lapa district, the rent boys braced themselves for the arrival of another wave of businessmen, poised between the end of the office day and their wives. She saw it when she went running in the evening on the *pista*, where other men and women ran, eyeing each other as they passed. Occasionally deadly coral snakes and long grey vipers wiggled across the path. Out to sea, small islands and supertankers vied for supremacy of the horizon. Everything spoke of beauty. Everything said: it's only sex, it's not that serious. Even if it might kill you.

"In this unstable border area," she continued reading, "there is a danger of slipping beyond the pale and never coming back, as well as a possibility of drawing from the vast ocean of unexploited forces surrounding organised society a personal supply of power, thanks to which he who has risked all can hope to modify an otherwise unchangeable social order."

The Navajo myth of transformation. The Indian who went as far as the earth allowed one to go in search of personal power. He made himself go far from home, into a kind of borderland. He did this because he wanted

to be granted a fierce guide from the spirit world, as well as to find himself. The only way he could do this, the only culturally acceptable manner, was to leave his home and venture into a place where he could control almost nothing.

And what happened when he arrived at the world's end?

He stood still, weeping bitterly, praying and moaning. And yet no mysterious sound reached his ears, nor was he put to sleep, in order to be transported, as he slept, to the temple of the magic animals. For him there could no longer be the slightest doubt: no power, from anyone, had been granted him....

Next to her bed is a pad on which she can write things for the doctor. She has not spoken in two weeks, not since she first felt the flashes of fire singe their neat paths through her insides.

No one seems distressed by the fact that she can't speak, except when she raves and different foreign languages simmer together in the pot of her various fevered nightmares, bubbling up to the surface at irregular intervals. Now French, now Portuguese, now Spanish, perhaps a little German and Italian and even Gaelic, which she speaks quite well. She is comforted by the thought that no one has heard her voice since she returned. Here, in the north, the voice has a different timbre. She would not be speaking in her Brazil voice, her real voice: the voice of someone who has been hobbled like a camel and had their dromedary water-tank insides drunk dry.

All her reserves are used up. She is bloated and overweight. Her muscles have sunk into soft mush, her white blood cell count is very low and, to top it all off, mosquitoes are buzzing in her cranium.

On the pad, the one the doctor solicitously left beside the bed, she performs abstract equations:

1) Experience = transformation (Sennet)

2) Transience = uniqueness (Rilke)

3) Certainty = doubt (anyone who has a brain)

The doctor finds these when she is at last asleep. He writes on her chart: solid food tomorrow.

"I told him he had to move out," Michel said.

They were sitting in the shopping mall coffee shop, where they went every morning to share an espresso.

"Who?"

"Jack." He looked at her obliquely. "It's her salary of—" He named a figure, Ana's salary. "—her apartment, her problem." He always seemed to know the numbers of things. He knew the square metre size of Ana and Jack's apartment, both their salaries. He talked constantly of the

days when he had had money; what he had paid for things, what other people had paid him.

"How do you know it's her problem?"

He gathered his face into a tired little effeminate *moue.*

"I'm a man," he said, and paused to finish his coffee, replacing the cup with a neat little French *clack.* "It is something I immediately understand."

Enervé. Désespéré. Déprimé.

A flurry of words, each sounding like the beating wings of a hummingbird, exited his mouth in his impotent zeal to describe the *waiting.* Waiting on lawyers. No money. More waiting by the fax machine. He was always waiting to hear if his ex-partner had bought him out. That way he could pay back Ana and Jack; that way he could buy a ticket home to France.

"I can't go running with you tonight."

"Why not?" She had begun to look forward to their twilight runs together, which they would finish by sitting and watching the moon rise over Guanabara Bay, arcing from behind the looming science fiction shape of the Pão de Açúcar.

He lifted his foot to show where the sole had partially detached itself from his running shoe.

"They've finally fallen apart," he said, and frowned. "Nikes too—I bought them in France. They're too much here, and I don't see the point of getting bad running shoes."

"Oh," she said. She was disappointed. That evening, she went running alone.

In her fever bed she makes a list: Things I am not expressing.

The suspicion growing in a delicate crescendo, its reedy tune. How his face closed down toward me once I had done it.

"I know women are afraid that once they have made love men will look at them differently," Michel told her. "But tell me, how could it be otherwise? Once you have seen someone responding to what you are doing to them?"

Doing to them. Harm. Doing things to other people.

Is that why we are here? she wrote. *To do things? To other people?*

The way his face closed. The way he took me and my credit card.

She could see herself now, the way she sat in the chair and watched him walk around the shoe store with nearly a hundred and fifty dollars of her money on his feet, and thought: this is what friends do together. (Or was it, this is what lovers do together?)

In the shops, they spoke French, evaluating the shoes. They spoke their language, the one they had constructed just for themselves,

knowing that Ana and Jack did not speak French. Wasn't she his woman, his girlfriend? She saw the shop assistants eyeing him, admiring him. She liked doing things for him. She liked the feeling of knowing herself to be generous.

In the bed, she wonders again at how she could have been conned by sex without actually doing it.

The fever is breaking like pack ice. Its residual heights look like ice mountains. They gobble up the whole horizon with their improbably torqued peaks. They look like whipped meringue. She shoots awake from her sweaty sleep.

Just like the mountains surrounding Rio.

Peaks, jutting, thrusting.

Whipped into a frenzy.

"When the crowd roared it was the best moment of my life."

And she saw, in his crumpled incomprehension, a man ten years younger who didn't understand how he had reached thirty-four years of age. And although she was young, she understood his incomprehension; how days became years and how the crowd's roar faded forever.

Michel was talking again of his past as a rugby player until an injury put him out of the game forever. They were watching television, a report on a famous woman tennis player. She was shown in her suite in Paris, surrounded by friends and family, the vastness of the room sprawling out behind her and the Eiffel Tower in the distance. Flowers and baskets of fruit adorned the room.

"Look at that life," Michel said, as one would when admiring a Black Forest cake in a bakery window, equally sweet, equally gratuitous.

"When we came out and heard the crowd roar," he said, and imitated once again the crowd's ear-deafening gush of adulation.

She got up and made to leave the room. She had heard this one too many times before, but still couldn't bring herself to criticise him for his hunger for intensity. Because she had it too. It was one of the surprisingly many things they had in common. Instead she said, "You are one of few people I have met who is fascinating and boring at the same time."

"Merci," he said, "thanks a lot." He tried his non-existent English, which she had been coaching him in. She was a little perturbed by his anger. Usually she didn't care.

"Je ne suis pas diplomate," she says.

In her bed, washed up on the broken shore of her fever, she is circling the truth. But it is well ensconced, like marrow in the bone. She must gnaw through something visceral to get to it. She may not even try. She

is less curious about the truth now.

In her bed, watching jaguars and ocelots walk across the sleek sunset shore of her fever, she feels the truth circling her. It has a vulture's aspect, a kind of shrunken posture. It knows it is not welcome, but it cannot resist the smell of a body laid prostrate underneath the weight of the potter's glaze Amazon sky.

She is turning the object in her hand. Like a prism, it separates out the various timbres of love—cool orange, mint blue, muted and regretful, the green that lives at the bottom of the heart, feeding off the vibrancy of the other colours. She has visions of beautiful objects being slowly turned and admired. A tetrahedron, each side identical in its flatness.

Another line from one of her totem textbooks:

"Any object...which can be examined from many sides gives the illusion of complexity. But it must be remembered that all sides are the same."

"I don't want to talk about Ana. I'm sick of talking about her. I don't care what she does," Jack said, a kind of false ferocity in his voice that meant: I do care. I care a lot.

But they did talk about each other to her. Jack took her for lunch and detailed the disintegration of their relationship. She talked with Ana about Jack's puerile stage of psychological development. She refused to discuss what the other had said to her, but instead framed everything in her own opinion. Things Jack had told her became statements along the lines of: my impression is that Jack has a very fragile sexual confidence and needs to bolster it, and you are just not the person to help him with that. To Jack she said: Ana was always cold. We both know that. Never did she betray their confidences.

Michel told Jack Ana's messiest sexual fears, he told Ana that Jack was using her. He told Jack that Ana was sexually dysfunctional and all he needed was a real woman.

She thought: we are wrapped up in one another. She liked the theatrical sinuosity with which they entwined the limbs of their psyches round one another. It was like a family: claustrophobic, visceral, and embarrassing. Secrets traded over breakfast, a complicated knot which unravelled into even more complicated knots. They each had hour-long telephone conversations with Michel. She merely tried to avoid the subject.

Later, she realised why he was winning. Because a fight had sprung up between them. At first accomplices, they were now rivals in an intricate, Byzantine power game. He was making himself necessary to each of them, to Ana and to Jack. He was trading secrets for confidences and information for conclusions. She knew that after all the years she had known Ana and Jack, she was being made to compete with him.

Why? she wondered. She would only be able to admit later that she knew it at the time: because Ana and Jack made no distinction between her seven years of plodding friendship and his one year of more exciting Amazonian soap-opera life story *amitié.*

So I fall for cheap people, she writes in her little hospital-issue notebook. *So I am an itinerant, a squatter pitching my tent in other people's lives (having none of my own). Getting my languages and my desires mixed up. Drinking their beer. Walking their dog. Thinking I am there. Where am I really?*

This is a good question—pourriez-vous me répondre, Herr Doktor?

Onde estou, agora que tudo esta acabado?

Where am I, now that it is all over?

"My work is my refuge," Ana said. "I don't know how to deal with my emotional life."

Ana did stories on children who live in the sewers of Bogotá. She descended into the noodle-world of globuled grease and teased the male photographer, who was more afraid than he ever had been in his life. She coaxed the children in feral Spanish promising them things—a warm meal, a pet—which she might or might not deliver. Ana told her all this with her fingers wrapped round a cup of warm camomile tea.

"When the rain fills the sewers they surface to be shot," she said, pleased, as if she had reached the punchline of a joke.

Jack was very drunk. Jack drank and smoked so much even she was worried. What happened to the man she knew three years ago, who was thin and happy in himself?

"I have to talk to Michel," he said, a note of desperation penetrating his liquor-thickened voice. "Don't say a word to Ana—she doesn't know, but I have to talk to him about some money I loaned him. We're talking thousands, okay?"

"Why did you do it?"

"He needed help. You know, he's been ditched by his girlfriend. He's got no money. And you should have seen him in his element, up there," Jack said. "Taking care of everything, driving four-wheel drives, cooking. He was such a *real man."* He finished, and looked up, the wounded expression in his eyes shining through the glassy coating of alcohol.

"Is he a friend, really?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, twirling his glass. "But I like to touch him."

She said: "I think you've taken advantage of me."

She had said this firmly, but with dread. And what she feared came to

pass. She saw it immediately: he was angry.

"Why did you suddenly stop talking to me?" she asked him.

"I perceived that you wanted something from me in return," he said, "so *j'ai coupé.*" I cut.

Had she wanted sex for money? Had she really thought that loaning money would make him more enamoured of the idea of sleeping with her?

"You knew there was nothing between us," he said. Well, that was not quite right. There had been something between them.

"You have a terrible character," Michel said.

"Yes, yes," she agreed. She would take anything now. She had been broken. She just wanted to get away. She would agree to anything.

"I've never met anyone as awful as you."

Well that's true, she thought, glad to have her worst suspicions about herself confirmed. His little tricks—leaving her behind when they went running together, saying he would meet her by the exercise bars on the beach where they always did press-ups and sit-ups together and then leaving, leaving her to wander around, wondering if he were watching her wander around, looking for him. Wondering, could he be so sure of her that he could treat her like this?

But he was. He was that sure of her.

In the same space occupied by that thought and that realisation, she understood that she had colluded with him. She had been a con-artist too, conning her friends, eating their food and drinking their beer and staying in their apartment for far too long, waiting for an adventure and real life to fall upon her, pondering whether she should go to Argentina or to Ecuador or how to stay in Brazil and live this real life she told herself she was living.

When she had first arrived in Brazil she needed the fan to sleep at night. She would come back from her runs drenched in sweat, breathing from within the furnace of a body unaccustomed to sweating so much. Now she simply could not get warm. The cool drafts breezed through the bare corridors of the huge apartment, slamming doors and rustling the leaves of shivering plants. The water falling through the courtyard was a continual deafening gush, wetting the garbage can and the clothes that would never be dry again, their threads marled and buttered. Dry wool smell picked and pricked with must. The rain hurled at the balcony doors, shattered glass on glass. The sound of alluvial cascades running down the Morro da Urca. And waking up at three in the morning to see nothing—nothing—outside the window but a malevolent sheet of grey water. The gods emptying slop buckets on the thin strip of a city ready to slide into the breakers.

Now that her fever has broken they let her wander listlessly up and down the halls. She takes her coat rack stand of a portable IV drip with her and it keeps pace with the stiff grace of a tango partner.

She has been hollowed out, wiped clean. She can have no more salt in her body, she imagines. What she did possess she has long deposited into the fetid sheets which she hopes the nurses are at this very moment changing. The hospital smells of camphor. She smells worse.

How do you measure the value of an experience? She has her fever, of course, and the illness that will always threaten to recur. She has a few limp muscles and extra pounds from all the *choppe* and the *churrascos.* She is down a couple of hundred dollars and two or three friends, depending upon how you look at it.

She shuffles, feeling the liquid piddle into her veins like a puppy pissing on a carpet.

"I want him out," Ana said. "How dare he hang around in our apartment, in our lives, feeling sorry for himself."

Elle va faire le ménage. She's going to do housecleaning.

"I'm going anyway," she assured Ana. "I don't think this was such a good time for a visit."

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you," Ana said. "We didn't know ourselves."

"What?" she asks. What did they not know?

"That it would be like this," Ana shrugs.

She was a linguist. She spoke French very well, Portuguese well enough to get by in any conversation. But they were not her languages.

"You will have an affair very soon," Michel told Ana, trying his ungainly manipulations on her.

"What, with you, Michel?" Ana said, with a mean bite. She marvelled at Ana's immunity from his tawdry charms.

She was a linguist, she was beginning to realise, because she could not bear not to be in control. Not being able to speak a foreign language renders one inert, she knew, the equivalent of a child. So she collected languages to shore herself up against possible disenfranchisements of her intellect, her mind. So that she would not be forced to fall back upon her body, her childish, smiling, pointing and gesticulating body, her mute self, which was only her betrayer-in-waiting.

She did not want to leave. Like a spectator at an auto accident, she could not tear her eyes away from the grisly scene in front of her.

He came to the airport with Ana and Jack to see her off. She wanted to ask him, standing there in the book shop: what do you want from them?

Then she caught sight of him, in the news stand, reading a magazine. His lips were moving as he read.

He moves his lips when he reads, she said to herself, insanely joyous. And suddenly she was free.

The day she came back to a full northern summer in June, hotter than it had been in Brazil, she began to pass out. First in the shower, then sitting down, then wandering around her cool and empty apartment. When it happened the fifth time and she found herself with her head against a slab of concrete and felt blood, she went to the doctor.

She is reading an anthropology text recommended to her by a colleague. Then, all of a sudden, she looks up from the text, out the hospital window to the grey streets of the North, and thinks: The truth. *Write it.*

She shudders to shake off the thought. Instead she turns to her textbook and reads: "Identify the constituent units of an institution."

1. Reduce a culture to its structural elements (relationships of opposition, transformation etc.)
2. Seek to explain homologies between various societies by dialectical terms.
3. Recognise that one simple man, one very charming, seemingly intelligent man, one man who has a great hard luck story, can be every one you have ever met. Everyone who has ever been your friend.
4. Societies survive on mutual manipulation. So the host tribe manipulates the visiting anthropologist and vice versa.

* * *

A Epoca da chuva. The rainy season. He lays sprawled and inert in the armchair. Ayrton Senna is dead, the funeral procession has long wound around the black heart of Brazil. The World Cup games have started. In the expensive apartment the table is scattered with Brahina beer cans, with slick pre-rain phrases and promises and airline tickets. Manipulations whirr around the room like locusts, looking for a ripe ear of corn on which to land. She sits there, too, caught in this pool of wet time.

On the television, the stupendously beautiful news reader tells how the rains have been the heaviest this century. Rio has been shut down for two days. The sidewalks are underwater and the buses can't run. Pedestrians wade through the torrents or clutch the elevated iron fences that front museums and art galleries and pull themselves along above the flood. In three days, the news reader says, Rio has received its total expected rainfall for the whole winter.

Contributors

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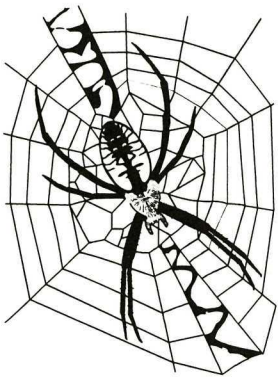

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Judge: David Arnason.

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Judge's Essay

Diane Schoemperlen

Fiction

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