

## Jane Covernton / IN MY COUNTRY

“Taste the bitterness,” Laurel said at the service this morning and I started to cry. It was at the boy’s funeral that I first thought: I should write all this down so I can understand it. But I haven’t been able to begin. Her husky voice came into the quiet of the dimly lit chapel over and over as she passed a tiny cup of bitter tea to each of us: “Taste the bitterness.” She said she’d given up sugar for Lent and we all thought: so she should, she’s so heavy. After the service, with muffins uneaten and sweet coffee cooling unsipped in my hands, I told her about Jaime. He had such lovely skin, silken brown, hair a dark wing of black, a gift of song. I’m a teacher I told her. If I were to say to my boss, my principal, that I killed him, he’d take my arm and walk me down the hall and say, “You don’t make their lives. Just do what you can.”

Yes, but what is that?

The principal did walk me down the hall. He said, “Don’t dwell on it.” And: “Get a grip, Ms Campbell.”

This is so hard to tell, to get down. Pretend someone is there, try to make them understand. Why are you going to church before work on dark Lenten mornings for example? Atonement, forgiveness, vengeance. I’ve become addicted to this kind of talk. Dark powers flying around attracting each other. I thought I could help Jaime. He was my hero. He renewed my faith in the possibility of — what? One world? That I would make music again? Music was almost dead in me. Jaime had such talent.

I am Melody and this is my song about a child who died. I don’t know why. That business about the rabbit, but why? And I don’t know why I have to do this work. I live in a house full of life: cats, kids, husband, mother-in-law. But I’ve been shocked out of niceness. I’m trying to find a place that isn’t niceness and that isn’t cynicism. I’m a person who only wanted to be nice, or perhaps I should say good. Some would put it more harshly and say I wanted to keep a lid on

things. I understood deep within my skin, far from the surface. I knew something was wrong with the child but didn't listen to my own knowing.

The principal says, "I reject that way of knowing." He wears stylish Nordic sweaters bought by his wife, makes lousy coffee, puts his hand on your shoulder, calls out to the kids, "Make yourselves useful."

"I teach through the feminine," I tell him in my mind. That's why I like to have a class full of little ones. I mother them. I exclaim with delight at their lumpy creations. I'm more motherly than the mothers. I'm not afraid of their bodies, their runny noses, their viruses, their bad teeth, their brown hands, their purple gums, their sandy skin, their twenty-six languages — none of them English. The children clutch my soft skirt with their little hands. I dream about them pulling me to shreds.

This is the kind of person I am — when the Gulf War started, I joined a choir. Now I go to church every Sunday to sing.

Taste the bitterness, I chant to myself. And I'm trying. Weave the boy's psychic universe and mine. Jaime — his quick laugh, the way he'd read to the others. A leader, a "good boy", a teacher's delight. When did I begin to know that all was not well? What inner voice did I squelch? He is "at risk". What strange jargon — how it declines to name the terror. One time I touched his neck. He shivered and crouched down away from me. Another time he was miserable with a vicious haircut, his silky hair in jagged spikes. "Don't worry. It'll grow back," I said in my perky teacher voice.

"This is your country now," I told him. He came to my class in September full of stories of his country. He had such pride in the people there. He sang of their struggle in his clear voice. I wanted him to stop caring so much about that place, but to keep singing, to make music. I said this is your country and that night loud Chinese voices broke into my sleep from the open window. I jerked awake, thinking: It's me who's in a foreign country. In summer my kids play in the yard and the lady next door hands candy over the fence to them, speaking the international language of sweetness, and talking all the time in Chinese. At night, their tv is loud in the house with us — a Chinese cop show, the anxious music understandable in any language. My son twitches and cannot sleep. I see that this is my country now. I had

described to Jaime a place that didn't exist.

Today he would be eight — the same as my own blonde boy, like a shadow to my fair son. But he was a real boy, with real flesh, and a real wounded heart. What were the nature of his wounds? I'll never know. The family's gone. The sister, who carried herself with the same wounded dignity as the mother, left the school that spring.

At the funeral with sunlight falling against the great golden wooden cross, and demons shooting back and forth, I realized I had to figure out this death. However, it's taken me this long to start and now under orders from my boss: get a grip. But I see I'm obsessed. He's dead but his influence is unaccountably alive in my mind.

I'm off sick. I worked for two days choked the whole time and the principal giving me looks. I can't shake this lump of sadness. I've taken time off almost eighteen months later to mourn the death of a child and what I'm brooding on is myself, my own memories, my own forgotten past. I keep thinking about the time in first year university I went out with a black man from Africa. He came to pick me up from my parents' house in a shiny new car. He told me he'd borrowed it from a friend but I found rental papers in the glove compartment. I fled but forget the details of my fleeing. His skin was ashy, is ashy in memory, compared to the bright skin of the boy I'm mourning.

Why do I circle this regretful story? I was unable to accept the gift the man gave me, his discomfort and need to be accepted. One of my most famous foremothers was a doctor in India, a missionary with the Methodist Church. I've always heard of her as a source of pride, how she shot snakes and travelled miles by cart to reach her patients. I still feel pride, but tinged with the same embarrassment I feel about my inter-racial date.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed girl in my class told me she had a brother who died. "It was before I was born. They were on a ship coming here. My Mum gave him some medicine to keep him quiet but it was dark and she gave him too much." She looked at me sharply. "Why are you crying?"

"That's a very sad story."

Why have I written all this down? I see that I've cherished this story and this moment because there was something right about it. I listened properly for once.

These are the things I'm thinking about:

How the world affects us in our small little lives, comes in waves of toxic smoke over the sea, raining poison ash, our genes unable to keep up, to adapt. Unusual weather all the time so we don't know what to expect any more. The Coming Earth Changes. The world comes in by satellite, by airplane. For me, the idea of travelling seems impossible now. But all the viruses fly in on airplanes from refugee camps. We're all sicker than ever before as we learn each other's germs.

I'm a white woman who lives in Canada. My country accepted Jaime's family as refugees from a country where the government tortures its citizens. I didn't know. I tried to be kind to his mother standing silent at the door to the classroom, a short, solid woman no bigger than the kids, her face solemn and closed, dulled by pain I see now, her hair black and shining with oil. Kindness without seeing.

My name is Campbell. I come from an ethnic group with its own history of torture. Before, when I travelled, I walked the dark hills where the Campbells invited the Frasers to dinner and knifed them all in a bloody massacre.

People joke defensively, "I'm coloured too," and indeed my skin seems to me subtle shades of rose and blue. I don't tan. The sun is my enemy. But how to tell this story without sounding racist? I'm called white. But I see white guys writing like this all the time. I don't want to whine that it wasn't my fault because behind my eyes I refused to see, as if being white was some kind of congenital blindness, a patch of fuzz in the middle of the eye or the brain that obscures the truth about the bitter world. Just offered the rabbit without thinking. Trying to be kind.

But I'm only a teacher. I wear a blue corduroy skirt, a white silk blouse. My friend Linda says she would never wear white, especially to school. I don't know why: I never spill; I always look neat.

All that year, one of my children brought me flowers. Her Grampa came in with long hanging ferns and she translated his Cambodian.

We are all racists: teachers, principals, schools. Twenty-six languages spoken here at last count. Skin is brown. White is an aberration. "Whites invented the wheel," I hear in the staffroom. "I'm glad I don't have the Rastadad," says one of the teachers. Rastas are the mystics of the Caribbean. A parent comes every day to get his son, his

black kinked hair pulled back into a bright hat. "Where is the Rastamom?" says another.

"This is your country now," I said to Jaime. He would tell me how they did things differently there. He knew the times tables. He was proud of where he came from, proud of their heroic struggle.

"He committed suicide. How is that your fault?" said the principal, said my husband.

The crisis that separated the past from the future was The War.

Two days before it started, I ran from the poison atmosphere of the staffroom. But there was nowhere to hide. At the community centre city maintenance men were eating lunch and arguing. "They should bomb the shit out of the A-rabs. Teach 'em a lesson." I walked around Trout Lake. Mist rose from the melting snow and hung in the willows. "They want war — put all the top guys out there, let them fight it out." The voices echoed in my mind. My friend Linda talking about Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador. Ripples on the lake circled out from a scuffling ball-chasing dog. I hurried back to work. My surroundings seemed possessed by spirits or primitive gods from another age.

The boss called today, unaccountably sweet. I said I was trying to write Jaime's story but couldn't. He said, "Just start at the beginning and work through to the end."

Okay: this is about a woman teacher in love with a child. Teachers aren't supposed to have favourites. He was the first child I felt that way about. My strong feelings were unsettling.

I'll write this for the boss then, but I can't talk to him about demons twisting my desire to help, turning it into a power game, my suspicion that I tried to over-power Jaime. He'd just shake his head. And he'd never have given Jaime the rabbit to take care of.

Okay try again:

The fixed action of my life was my innocence and privilege: my white skin, my sheltered childhood, my education, my sheltered adulthood. The moving action was the darkness that this child brought into my life. And this, finally, is my attempt to be grownup, to taste the bitterness. The story begins in a split second of pause. You can see me as I was: blissful, childlike, in denial, standing in a classroom filled with sunlight and the hum of purposeful activity. One of

the teachers stuck her head in and said quietly, "They're bombing Baghdad." It hit like a bout of food poisoning. I didn't believe it would really start. I turned away from the kids and then thought: they should see my tears. Duc-son said, "Do you don't like war?"

My story is haunted by the desert, by fire, by fear that the end has truly come and that I have no right to speak of these things from my position of sheltered privilege. How dare you — karate chop — tell me — karate chop — to forgive? Said Laurel after church one day, Laurel who wants to taste the bitterness. How dare you — karate chop — you've never been.

But we are all in history — we'll remember forever exactly what we were doing when we heard the bombing started — the smell of paperwhites, dustmotes in the air.

After a couple of days I turned off the tv. But the first night, my husband and I watched helplessly as his fourteen-year-old daughter silently traced the lines of the bombs in an atlas. The next night I went out alone to sing. My house full of lives. I went out to sing all alone in the pale wood of the church which throbbed with tears.

I believe in emotional viruses, mass mental illness, that each day has its own character. Occasionally, quite mysteriously, the kids are like wild monkeys in a cage of snakes. The full-moon syndrome. Long ago, a cop I briefly dated said that on full moon night the radio would crackle, phones ring wildly. In the days before the bombing started, and for a week after, the kids were nuts. Tony came into the classroom going whack whack whack at the other kids with a gym bag. They picked the tension off the tv, they caught it from their parents. Some of the children thought there were Starships on Mars getting ready to bomb Earth.

Cody hit Jaime with a wooden puzzle. There was a black and blue welt against his pale brown thigh and his cheeks were drained of colour. The principal came and led Cody away as I knelt by Jaime. Children pulled at my shoulders and called, "Ms Melody, Ms Melody."

But he came with bruises. He came with bruises and a story.

Today my husband's daughter — almost sixteen now — came home with bruises on her chin. She said "friends", male of course, held her down and twisted her chin. It was supposed to be funny. I think she has some thinking to do.

At a party once I danced with Rigoberto, friend of friends, who had lost the sight in one eye. But I can't hold in my mind two things — the charming hand sliding across my back as we turned to the music and something turning in his eye and sliding away. A long time ago, far away.

Jaime came with bruises and a story — a story that I could not bear to listen to, that I discounted, discredited, in my desire to be kind, to do good. He started to tell me as I was tending the welt on his leg but I said, "It'll get better soon."

The arguments in the staffroom almost stopped, but Linda kept up a barrage of anti-war talk. She took me to a protest rally. I stood under flickering snow in a grey courtyard in the darkening afternoon as electric dulcimer rang out across the almost empty concrete. Then a man told a story from ancient Iraq about how the Goddess Anana is wounded and goes underground to be healed.

"Ooh my arms hurt," she moans.

"Ooh your arms hurt," the other goddess moans back.

"Ooh my head hurts."

"Ooh your head hurts."

"Ooh my heart hurts."

"Ooh your heart hurts."

"Reflective listening," murmured Linda close to my ear. "It works." On the way home I told her I couldn't go to any more rallies; I couldn't go to any organizing meetings. That night I found myself yelling at my husband when he admitted he liked the images of planes and tanks shimmering in the desert. It was a kind of mass psychosis. One of the teachers was evacuated from her house because of a bizarre hostage-taking. Her street swarmed with heavily armed police for two days. The news was full of women killed by their mates. In the park beside the school they found the body of a man hanging from the climbing set.

We all dreamed about bombs. I dreamed of nuclear bombs going off in radiant flashes while I tried to cover the children's eyes with pieces of paper. On Sunday mornings I sang. Light shone through stained glass making auburn and purple patches on grey hair. "The subtext of the war is racism," announced Linda in the staffroom. She talked about the notion of "mere Iraqis," about "collateral damage."

Nobody was listening.

A tv appeared in the staffroom; it was on all the time. One day there was an interview with “Dr. Nuko, poster artist,” just back from Saudi Arabia. I was fascinated by his completely bald head and pointed ears. “Saddam Hussein has mined the oil wells. It will take a year to put out the fires if he goes ahead and blows them up.” I put my head down on the table. “No no no.” Two weeks later the oil wells were burning, and the newspapers reported calmly it will take a year to put out the fires. I lost track of Jaime.

The teachers went on strike. It seems like a dream now — walking the pavement, the gorgeous weather in February, the sugary doughnuts, the boredom. The last three days of the war were shirtsleeves and gardening weather in Vancouver. Then the strike was over, the war was over, and it snowed again.

I gave Jaime the class rabbit to take care of while we were on strike. I thought it would be good for him to take responsibility for a small helpless being. I wanted to help Jaime. Now, from the other side, I don't see how I could have. But that's everything I do as a teacher. I had this ideal image of myself as someone who mattered, who could work towards harmony in my little sphere. Now I think I might have to quit, but for now I've phoned the principal and told him I'm ready to come back.

Back then, as they bombed Tel Aviv and Baghdad back and forth and nothing bad happened here, the children eventually settled down. All except Jaime. There was sun in February — Vancouver gleaming in denial. We were all in denial. Finally rain came, then snow after all that eerie sun, finally the truth. Finally something real to grieve. Jaime killed the rabbit, mutilated it, and his neighbours brought the police to his door. Later that day he stood on the edge of busy Twelfth Avenue — two women saw him — then ran out in front of a car and died on the way to the hospital.

Now I see that the notion that you can “help” is the last vestige of the colonial idea. My faults were of a piece with my history and I am saturated with sadness.