

# THE CAPILANO REVIEW



I have no idea why I'm such a liar. I just am. I told the guy  
who gave me a ride home that I'm the youngest ever  
law student at UBC. I mean THE TRUTH is a very important  
issue to me but I mean in a general sort of way.

—Joan MacLeod

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## Stephanie Bolster / SEVEN POEMS

### VORTEX

On the corner of Broadway and Blenheim under the golden arches, a woman sits on the sidewalk, looks through the magician's hat of her purse, hoping for tricks. Beside the gape of her car's open door, the hum of the engine desperate to go somewhere, she finds a pack of cigarettes, a pink lipstick, a sliver of mirror.

The white-bearded man on the opposite corner thinks he is God. He faces the wind, the approaching bus, his hair blown back. He could turn her stray tissue to a single dove, he thinks. Her wallet could swell with wealth. He could do all this if he wanted, if he thought it mattered; if he loved her there, rummaging.

The driver of the bus wants only for the long hand of his watch to reach the top, when the bus will empty of laughter and chat and reach the lot, rattle into silence. Wants only his shoeless feet on the coffee table, his back against the stained cushions of the couch.

What happens is a fluke of electricity sprung free when the bus leaps its wires. The woman's purse turns to a waistcoat, the contents to a rabbit with nickels for eyes, maxi-pad ears, a chain of clinking keys instead of a watch.

She follows its hopping over the cracks in the sidewalk, watches it lift the manhole cover & descend. (The hum of her car an enigma, the door flung wide.) The bus driver adjusting his wires, the lonely man with the beard, both turn as she drops through, feel the shock in their teeth as her body goes, the cloud of her permed hair a possibility vanishing.

25 APRIL 1856

How was it that first time, did they meet  
through a simple raising of eyebrows, curious:  
her about these 2 tall men with cumbersome  
paraphernalia, him about these 3 little girls  
playing in the Deanery garden.

The men had come to photograph the Cathedral,  
but Dodgson put the children  
in the foreground, an experiment;  
first the flood of chemicals, *collodion* and *silver nitrate*,  
then 45 long seconds of stillness,  
and she only 4 and quick.

He was 24 then, did not choose her  
as his favourite until the *Adventures*  
6 years later. But something began  
that afternoon, marked in his diary with a white stone.

Perhaps it was the garden, Alice and her sisters  
2 years on either side of her, blooming amongst  
the flowers of April, in England.  
Her hair a brown thatch, cut straight  
across the forehead, her dark blue eyes  
tight buds. The possibility of spring  
and he only 24 and searching.

Although accustomed to gazes, to arranging  
hands (her father was Dean of Christ Church, her mother  
dressed the girls the same, so they would look  
a picture) Alice remembered this one man, remembered  
his stiffness, as though he had swallowed a poker.  
He seemed afraid of her, and that was something,

her only 4 and him old enough  
to be her father, how they both stood  
tense and ticking  
in the infinite unfurling garden  
during the long exposure.



## WHICHEVER RABBIT

Had it been Peter, rather than White, she'd followed  
that lazy afternoon, she would have found  
not the falling, but the hole  
in a fence, mesh outstretched to snag her there.

No ticking of a pocketwatch this time,  
no key to unlock some tiny door.  
She would have crawled through  
in her own size, emerged torn and scratched  
but otherwise intact, into the waiting garden,  
to the déjà vu of a rabbit's retreating tail.

This garden fountainless, lacking white or red  
roses, unthreatened by upstanding cards.  
Here would be safety, carrots  
and the delicacy of young lettuce, her hands prying food  
from the warm earth, knowing its taste  
would not change her.

But then the man from the farmhouse, Mr. McGregor,  
shouting he'd have her, head and all. The rabbit scrambling,  
the gap between wire much too small for her hips.  
This King booming out a proclamation, louder  
than the Queen of Hearts': *Get out.*

If Peter left his coat behind as evidence  
then she would leave baby fat, flat chestedness.  
Stumble home in the dark  
clutching a gnawed carrot, knowledge of the garden.

## DERIVATIONS

As a child I considered  
changing my name, paid 49¢ of my allowance  
at the supermarket checkout for *3500 Names for Baby*, chose  
a new one every week and demanded my family  
call me that. I still have Christmas gift tags  
addressed to “Anna;” remember signing myself  
“Amanda;” contemplated “Antonia” because I’d wanted  
as my best friend an Antonia  
in a book I’d read, and because the name dictionary said  
it meant “super-excellent.”

I must have found the B’s less interesting or grown  
tired by that point, skipped all the way to the given  
sinuousness of S, remembered a segment  
on *Sesame Street* claiming that letter began  
more words than any other in the alphabet.

I never considered Agnes, Abigail, Arlene,  
and somehow I skipped Alice. Whether this was because  
it already belonged to my grandmother (Catherine Alys, a spelling  
I could never remember, wanted to pronounce  
“alleys”) or because of my mother’s friend with that name  
(who’d made her own children eat tuna casserole  
but not me) or because it was too steeped  
in the ordinary, I do not know. The wonderland book  
lay downstairs in unread anonymity.

Now Alice seems the most delicate of the A's, suggesting  
alyssum, whispers. None of the visual ice  
infects the sound, the hushed sweetness, the careful authority  
of alphabetical beginnings.

Like my name, Alice apparently derives  
from the Greek. I see her astride a winged horse, or carved in marble,  
worshipped in secret near the sea under a cloudless sky.  
If I believe the little book, then Alice means truth.

## TO SUSANNA: WITH BELATED CONSOLATIONS

Alice was an immigrant too, only  
not yet written. You left England in 1832,  
she crawled away 30 years later.  
Both of you in the scorch of summer

went underground, explored  
root, the composition of soil,  
found the sudden darkness

of winter. Your husband shot rabbits  
and Alice greeted them, her quivering bare  
legs attempting a curtsy. What she met  
you ate, stripped of its skin.

If she had existed earlier  
you could have read of her journey,  
seen your own journal suddenly  
redeemed. Alone in the dark

cabin with all your children  
you could have read the story aloud,  
caught shimmers of delight and familiar  
fear in those eyes,  
too young to fully understand  
the world they had been shoved into,  
but still knowing. That long shiver

up the spine when Alice plunged,

emerged dripping on the other side  
of her own tears.

## *HALF-SICK OF SHADOWS*

Alice grew huge,  
became the caster of shadows  
rather than the one cast  
in their darkness.

Became the giant  
part of herself that carried  
its own shadow  
around with it

like a bag of ashes.

## THE REAL ALICE

This biography recounts your romance  
with a haemophiliac prince  
(youngest son of Queen Victoria) whom the likes of you  
could not have married; the naming  
of his second child after you,  
your second after him.

It records your wedding to an undergraduate  
(*the nicest, kindest young man imaginable,*  
*and not totally unintelligent by any means*)  
where the bells at Oxford rang for an hour,

and Dodgson's gift of a gilt-framed watercolour  
was omitted from your extensive list  
(*Mr and Mrs Conbeare, lotus-leaf*  
silver toast-rack and walnut tea-table;  
*Viscount and Viscountess Cranbrook, silver looking-glass*)  
for no given reason.

A family tree details the blood  
that links you to the present  
Queen (fifth cousin thrice removed),  
records your third son as Caryl,  
a name you said was simply  
from a novel.



Your life a catalogue of deaths —  
your frail prince from falling down stairs;  
several of your siblings  
in childhood; two of your sons  
in war — and then Dodgson's funeral,  
one you did not attend, though sent  
a floral tribute.

After your husband's death,  
of all valuables you chose to sell the original  
manuscript of *Alice* for house repairs  
and servants' wages, though why  
remains unwritten.

The insufficiency of such godless details, the absences  
that can never explain the crowning one: the missing

smile from your face in photographs,  
even in childhood, and at 80  
when Columbia University presented you  
with an honorary doctorate

and a three-tier  
birthday cake laden with icing  
and the characters of Wonderland; when Caryl

told reporters your favourite  
character was the Cheshire Cat.

(Italicized passages are quotations from Anne Clark, *The Real Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dream Child*. London: Michael Joseph, 1981.)

## Renee Rodin / THREE POEMS

### FOR LUCK

I pat the shell of the blue/green carved turtle  
though according to Marie, my father's friend  
who learned to read cups from her mother in Egypt  
the turtle signifies the enemy  
because it hides  
she was dismayed to find its feathery form  
in the dregs of my espresso  
I've always relied on the hidden being benign

I've knocked on wood  
saved spiders from drowning in tubs  
lit sage to dispel lingering ill-will  
picked only multiples of fives  
even if Grandma Sneakers told me in numerology  
my affinity is with six

the lion is my sun sign      the elephant my champion  
from the time in London  
I was young, very pregnant and braced with prejudice  
as an old Gypsy approached me in Petticoat Lane  
wary she'd gyp (as in Gypsy) rip me off  
she took my hand and pressed into it  
a tiny white elephant  
"for luck" she whispered and disappeared

I lost it in the hospital  
but came home with a beautiful baby

since, I'm aware of the special powers of elephants  
they've been given to me on other occasions  
I've chosen some on my own  
all different kinds  
all with a certain quality I can't describe

when the kids were bigger  
on a rare evening I splurged to step out  
the sitter couldn't be there  
instead she sent her mother, who waited in the kitchen  
while I ran to each child cajoling them into bed  
anxious she could hear my pleadings, hisses, commands  
"please lie down, go to sleep  
go to sleep, lie down, please"  
as they did their three-ring circus routine

at last they were settled, I was ready to leave  
the woman said "don't get insulted"  
oh, oh my insides clenched  
here's the critique on my inept parenting techniques  
"your elephants are wrong" she pointed  
"your luck is going out the door"

I removed them from the sill, never near a window or a door  
and brought some in, for luck, to my bookstore  
where they caused great consternation  
people in flaps, advising and admonishing me  
"turn your elephants around"  
"head on to protect you"  
"on an angle"  
"beside a dish of water"

now they are in the position I favour  
from a young man who was taught by his father in Syria  
have them face the door  
let them always see the way that is out  
so they know they are with you by choice, for luck

and from my mother and hers from Russia  
whenever you make a new home  
first bring in a bit of bread and some salt  
this means you'll have everything you need  
the sustenance and spice of life will be yours  
it works  
for luck

## READERS AND COMPANY

Eudora Welty as a child believed books grew in gardens  
so they do  
no matter what the terrain planted they grow  
producing weird, wonderful fruits and flowers  
you name it especially if you don't  
they grow everywhere

a legacy from my mother  
the image of her lying on her bed reading  
content for brief periods with existence  
her mother too, voracious  
the family joked she'd read anything  
and watched her glued to "Midnight"  
the Montreal ultra-trash (en anglais)  
they set before her 90 year old eyes

early on the treasure was my library card  
my ticket away  
I devoured several books a week  
mostly biographies of famous women  
but Freud might have been right when he said  
"the mechanism of poetry is the same as that  
of hysterical phantasies"  
the first big crush I had was on Chester  
who sat beside me in grade two  
because he wrote me a poem

a while later I fell in love with another 16 year old  
who I was eventually to marry and have children with  
(reverse a bit of that order)  
when he handed me a paper napkin  
on it was a poem he said he'd written for me  
by the time I found out it was really a Dylan song  
it was too late I was already smitten  
though I should have paid closer attention to the title  
"It Ain't Me Babe"

throughout my life all my lovers (I've had a few)  
and friends (I've been blessed with many)  
have had passionate relationships  
some heckled when they were drunk  
some heckled when they were sober  
they were all intensely involved  
listened to, read, wrote poetry

my resistance to the poet not to the poem  
is stronger now  
unlike my promiscuous grandmother  
my tastes are particular  
similar to Emma Goldman who never left home without one  
in case she might get arrested  
I am seldom far from a book

without a book going I am irritated, itchy  
my mind yearning to be scratched in some unknown place  
the room is littered with them  
there's usually at least one I take into my bed  
the last to touch before I fall asleep  
the first I see when I awake

whether weak or strong-spined, thick or thin  
I am stimulated    satisfied  
lost and found  
by the source of many dreams

## FOR FLORENCE

giddily we greeted your death  
heady with freedom  
when you and Daddy used to go out  
Sandy and I would jump up and down  
on the beds over and over  
until we were sated with excitement  
I wanted you to come home already  
where were you?

ma mammoth mammal you huge pale whale  
hidden dark beneath 300 pounds of scared fat  
baby what a scared baby you were  
so brilliant and bound  
corsetted up mostly wasted  
born too soon we bore too much of the weight

you consumed in the past  
family famished infant in fantasy  
with silence we shared our secret  
each afraid to be the other  
you afraid to be your mother  
all dying to be free

finally we could talk  
about the experience of your power  
fury stoked by frustration  
raging that went for months on endless  
we were an accord of anger unravelling



the "kinder" looking to find your kinder being  
passion and politics when you felt good  
belting out songs  
laughing from the belly  
beauty full light warm

I touched you were so cold  
three kisses a blessing my three kids  
yours said Kaddish at the grave  
we washed our hands in snow  
lit a candle it burned for a week  
your safe passage attended by masses  
of coffee and company sitting Shiva with us

inconceivable to be motherless  
fill the void a void the feeling  
till months later startling periods of pain  
my waters broke slowly  
you arrived in the night  
a guest of air flowing through me  
cleansing like a cat and her kitten  
"ketzelah" sometimes you'd call me  
and "mamalah" when I was still the baby

sha baby  
sha baby  
sha

## Michael Crummey / SIX POEMS

### SOUTH OF BADGER

South of Badger the forest stutters effortlessly  
over low rolling hills  
long stretches of birch and alder  
the darkness of spruce trees crowding the road

My people came this way by river from the coast  
Englishmen carrying rifles, trinkets, smallpox,  
a distrust of the unnamed  
they stumbled on a habitat for nomads  
for hunters and gatherers  
the barrens opening onto acres of shrub land  
brush land, miles of moss covered rock  
where nothing has ever grown by design  
bog land, breeding ground for water fowl and insects,  
for pitcher plants  
deep fresh water lakes home to the crooked snouts  
of salmon and nine pound trout

Somewhere in there they found a pocket of ore  
laced with veins of copper, zinc  
a little gold and silver  
they traded all they had brought but the rifles  
constructed a town over shrub land, brush land  
building houses, schools, a hockey rink  
and eighty miles of dead-end highway  
men burrowing thousands of feet into earth  
to harvest dust

busted rock winched out of darkness for seventy-odd years  
till the mine was defeated by the country's stinginess  
and the company shut it down

Coming up that road for the first time in years  
through Buchans Jct. in the dark and driving slow  
half-a-dozen times the headlights answered by  
the dumb stare of a moose happy to be free  
of forest underbrush  
they can't believe their luck  
to have stumbled on a clear path north  
and there's not enough traffic these days  
to give it much human meaning;  
they relinquish it with some reluctance  
looking back as they lope into the near trees  
the cars passing by on the temporary pavement,  
already the forest is working to bury what's  
been left behind

## MORNING    LABRADOR COAST

Morning    Labrador coast  
my father is thirteen  
no, younger still  
eleven maybe twelve  
shivering to warm himself in the dark

The rustle of surf behind him  
the passiveness of it at this hour  
the grumble of men waking early  
in the shacks  
the steady muffle of piss  
smacking a low mound of moss at his feet

He's almost given up on childhood  
works a full share on the crew  
smokes dried rock-moss rolled in  
brown paper out of sight of his father

Each morning he makes fists to work the stiffness  
out of his hands and wrists  
the skin cracked by sea salt  
the joints swollen by sleep after hours of work  
he soaks them in the warm salve  
of his urine  
shakes them dry in the cold air

and turning back to the shacks  
he sees stars disappearing in the blue  
first light breaking out over the water,  
the dories overturned on the grey beach  
waiting

COD (1)

Some days the nets came up so full  
there was enough cod to swamp the boats  
and part of the catch came in with other crews  
once they'd filled their own dories  
to the gunwales,  
the silver-grey bodies of the fish rippling  
like the surface of a lake  
the weight of them around their legs  
like stepping thigh deep into water

Most of the work was splitting and curing  
the thin gutting knife slivered up the belly  
and everything pulled clear with the sound bone  
liver into the oil barrel  
the thick tongue cut from the throat  
and the splayed fish ready for salting then  
set out on a flake to dry

This until one in the morning sometimes  
a river of cod across the cutting table  
in the yellow swirl of kerosene lamps  
and everyone up by three or four  
to get back out to the nets with the light  
There was no talk of sleep when  
the cod were running strong,  
a few good weeks could make a season;  
if they dreamt at all

in those three brief hours a night  
they dreamt of the fish  
the cold sweet weight of them,  
fin and tail flickering in their heads  
like light on the water

## COD (2)

August.

My father has sent the crew  
home early for the second year in a row  
the cod so scarce he can do  
the work himself and still have time  
to sit in the evenings  
time to think about the flour and molasses  
the netting, the coils of rope and twine  
the tea and sugar and salt he took  
on credit in the spring

Every night he dreams of them plentiful  
the size of the fish years ago  
big around as your thigh,  
the thick shiver of their bodies  
coming up in the cod traps

He turned seventeen this February past  
his father has been dead two short seasons;  
alone at the water's edge he sits  
mending a useless net and smoking,  
already two hundred dollars in debt  
to the merchants

There are no cod in the whole frigging ocean



# LILACS

The well is contaminated and we have to  
drag a bucket of water up from the brook;  
we pull handfuls of lilacs from the trees  
outside the open windows and set them  
in glasses through the house to mask the smell  
of rooms shut up with themselves for years

There are old saucers of poison placed  
on countertops and mantelpieces, spoor in the pantry  
and Dad tells me how he'd chase mice through  
the house with a stick when he was a boy  
although it was considered bad luck for the fishing  
and his father forbid killing them  
during the season;

in Labrador, he says  
you could follow the paths they'd beaten  
through the long grass in the dark  
but no one raised a hand to them all summer

There are still two beds in the room  
where my father was born in nineteen-thirty  
and we roll out our sleeping bags there,  
then walk to the corner store for food and beer;  
later I watch his face in the pale light  
of the coleman lantern  
try to connect him to what I know of that time  
dust bowl photographs, soup kitchens

stories of vagrants at back doors offering  
to chop wood for a meal  
but I know I have it hopelessly wrong —  
he wanted nothing more for me  
than that I should grow up a stranger to all this  
that his be one of the lives I have not lived

After the lights are put out  
there is a silence broken only by the sounds  
we make as we shift in our beds and  
the occasional scuffle of mice in the hallway;  
the age of the house gives a musty  
undertone to the sweet smell of the lilacs  
and it seems stronger in the darkness  
so that I imagine I am breathing in what's left  
of the world my father knew  
while the part of him that has never  
managed to leave here is asleep across the room

## CIGARETTES

When my father gave up smoking  
the thing he found hardest was knowing  
what to do with his hands  
with the first fifteen minutes after a meal,  
and driving into town is like that now —  
what you notice first are the things that are  
no longer here  
the double row of bunkhouses torn down  
the green clapboard mess hall  
the old storage shed behind the pool  
that had once been a stable for  
the company horses  
long before the road went through

After supper Dad and I take a swing  
onto company property, circle in behind  
the fenced crater of the Glory Hole where  
almost everything is missing  
the deck heads at Rothemere and MacLean's  
felled like trees  
core shacks and warehouses bulldozed  
the concrete stumps of the shower rooms  
left naked in the ground where they were poured  
fifty years ago  
Only the mill is still on its feet  
ash-coloured, useless  
waiting to be taken down like an old photograph  
and turned to the wall in an attic room

*Thirty years* my father says  
turning slowly  
and I remember a story about a horse he drove  
when he came here to work in '47  
the mare nuzzling his shirt pocket for tobacco  
first thing in the mornings  
snatching hand-rolled cigarettes straight  
from his lips if he tried to light up  
in front of her

Gone now, sold off by the company  
and dead somewhere  
Molly, I think her name was

Still, I have only a vague idea of what's been lost;  
my father is surrounded by more than  
the simple absence I can see here

a life he's not quite finished with going on  
just beyond what he's able to touch  
like the impossible ache of a phantom limb  
or that craving, the automatic fumbling for  
the cigarette pack he's forgotten is  
no longer there

## Elizabeth Hay / HAND GAMES

It must have had a small, almost invisible beginning, or else I was so intent on believing that nothing was the matter that I missed it. I remember my growing sense of dismay, and my almost constant inner refrain that children are resilient. And I remember one afternoon that came to seem like the beginning, not of the bad time but of my awareness of the bad time.

I was walking down the street ahead of my daughter Annie and her friend Joyce. We paused frequently. Joyce was wearing black patent leather shoes, and every hundred yards she bent down to wipe off the dust. The shoes were tiny and new, and she dusted them off with a white handkerchief. She was very small for four. Annie was the same age but much taller and puppy-like.

We weren't far from home. The streets were lined with old trees and the sidewalk was yellow with leaves. I was carrying a bag of groceries in my right hand. Just before we got to the corner, I felt Joyce's small hand slide into my free hand, leaving the other one for Annie.

The game unfolded. Annie took my encumbered hand. For a while she said nothing, then she whimpered — insisted — that I put the bag in my other hand. I told her not to be silly. Joyce said nothing. She'd said nothing when she ran ahead of Annie to slide her hand into mine, creating this deliberate, wordless, artful triangle.

The two girls were dressed in yellow and pink, and yet they reminded me of dark illustrations in an old storybook. *Dwarf with Dog* would be the caption. I saw my daughter gambolling at the feet of a tiny, dark, compact master. I saw myself in my daughter and my mother in myself — a long and sorry line of tailwagging.

That morning on the front steps Joyce had kept one hand in her bulging pocket.

Annie asked, "What's in your pocket?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

"*Nothing.*"

I lay awake at three in the morning and my daughter's face floated up, the moment when the two girls were coming down the stairs of Annie's school. We'll make hot chocolate, I said to them. Annie turned to Joyce and with a bright smile asked if she wanted hot chocolate. Joyce responded in a low voice. I was ahead of them and didn't catch the words. I caught the tone. I turned and saw my daughter's face widen, a pond into which a stone had been thrown.

We walked home. For a while they played, and then Annie asked for her toy phone. She held out her hand and Joyce walked over with it. A foot away Joyce stopped, put the phone to her own ear, turned her back, and began to talk to Wendy and Peter Pan. Annie lay on the sofa holding a doll to her chest. I saw her face wiped clean, glassy, the outermost reaches of the ripple. And did nothing.

Immobilized by the snake — the touch of the snake — the knowledge that someone can turn against you when you've done nothing wrong; the cavalier nature of friendship; the arbitrary nature of dislike; the twist of rejection; the fall from grace. All of these were present in that small configuration in the dark living room: one child lying on the sofa with averted eyes, the other talking into the toy phone, her back turned.

I did nothing. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid to scold Joyce because she was the daughter of an old friend.

Small hand in mine: soft warm devious hand brushing against mine as though with affection and need. I felt my palm mapped with her ill intentions, implicated in the betrayal of my daughter, pulled into the small child's canny vindictiveness — an intricate, serious, unhappy world. I played along with her even as I saw the game, drawn into the sophisticated world of the smaller child. Impressed by it.

Impressed by the meticulous words she was able to print, by the drawings, complex with colour and minute shapes. Seduced by the seriousness of the child, and intimidated.

Dwarf. Child/adult simultaneously. The interruption of a natural progression. We see a dwarf and are transfixed by the sight of adulthood in the form of a child forever estranged from adulthood, and we look away embarrassed and afraid.

Annie comes home. She comes through the door, hangs on the knob, leans into the door and then into me. She says, "Joyce did everything to hurt my feelings," and her face finally runs with tears.

It wasn't always this way. We moved into this building in September, and for two months their friendship flourished in a form of Eden. The bad time — the first and worst bad time — began in November and went on for two months. Joyce would run to her small rocking chair and hiss, "This chair is my chair, this chair is my chair," low enough so that her mother couldn't hear but loud enough so that Annie heard, so that I heard — the woman who did nothing. She planted her tiny feet and stretched her arms across the hallway so that Annie couldn't pass. She pounced on Annie's mistakes. "That's not a jumping, it's a jumper. That's not a bicycle, it's a tricycle. That's not a skirt, it's a kilt."

At night Annie lay in bed under Joyce's bedroom and listened to the sounds upstairs. She wrapped her handkerchief around her hand and pretended it was broken. She breathed on the window, then drew a heart in the moisture and said, "I'm drawing a heart for Joyce."

Joyce likes to fold towels and pillow cases. I've watched her make the corners meet precisely and smooth the surfaces. She builds neat piles and guards them. After any trip, no matter how short, she goes into her bedroom and touches all the stuffed animals. Her mother has told me this. I suspect she doesn't have names for them. She doesn't pretend they are anything but what they are. But she likes them. When her sisters throw them off the shelf, I've seen her grab the nearest arm and pinch. She gets punished but she doesn't seem to mind this kind of punishment: the sister removed, the door closed, the silence. She puts the animals back on the shelf, always in the same order: soft blue donkey with faded ribbon, rougher older larger bear, white owl, grey rabbit, brown rabbit, cloth rabbit, white lamb, purple hippo — blue, brown, white, grey, brown, pale yellow, white, purple. She arranges colours in her drawings with the same care. When anyone compliments her on her drawings, and they often do, she doesn't acknowledge the compliment. And she never holds up a drawing to say look at this.



Annie puts her hand in mine and feels the hard ridge of plastic, the reduced space for her own hand, the weight of groceries pulling my arm down, my quick step; and there is Joyce, on the other side, with my free hand all to herself.

The softest part of my hand is the palm and the hardest part is the bottom of the fingers. They are the hardest and coldest part. Annie tells me, "My skin is soft and your skin is hard."

She brushes against my leather jacket and looks down at the sidewalk which is uneven and dusty. People pass by and say of Joyce, "How adorable, is she yours?" "No," I say, "she's a friend."

Annie tries to take Joyce's hand and sometimes Joyce lets her, and sometimes Joyce tightens her hand into a fist, and sometimes she jerks her hand away, and sometimes she pushes Annie away.

We walk up the steps to our building. We rent the first floor, Joyce's family has the second, a family with three boys lives on the third, an old woman on the fourth. Six wide steps lead up to the blue front door. At the top of the steps, Joyce and Annie scramble for the wealth of menus left by all the pizzerias in the neighbourhood. Joyce gets four, Annie gets two. "Inside you'll share them," I say.

In the kitchen Joyce slides into Annie's chair and says, "I'm the guest."

Annie looks at me. I look away and say yes, that's right, Joyce is the guest.

Increasingly, I have been feeling the weight of Joyce's jacket. It is soft, bright pink, a year old. The weather has turned cold. Today I ask Joyce if she would like to wear her coat and she gives a fierce shake of her head. I drape the coat over the back of the stroller in which the baby is sleeping, and we walk across the street to get Annie. The girls go to different schools, and twice a week I pick up Joyce as well as Annie.

In the hallway I button up Annie's coat, adjust her hat, and say to Joyce, "You can wear the coat or you can put it over your arm but you have to carry it."

Joyce is holding one of her drawings, she says she can't carry her coat as well.

"Put the drawing in the stroller then," and I reach for it.



Joyce steps back. Refuses.

"You have to carry your coat, Joyce. Each of us is responsible for her own coat. I'm not going to carry it."

I know the coat could be shoved easily into a corner of the stroller, or draped over the back. But I am irritated because my ploy hasn't worked and because I am using a ploy. Now that the train of events has been set in motion, it will play itself out in full.

I insist. Joyce refuses. I take the coat, which has a hood, and drop the hood over Joyce's head. We set off. I have to buy vegetables. Half way down the block Joyce is crying, darkly furious and on the verge of a tantrum, that the coat is slipping off her, that she has to hold her picture. Outside the vegetable store, she lets the jacket fall to the sidewalk. A passerby picks it up and hands it to me, and I drop the hood over her head. By this time she is storming — loud piercing cries, choked sobs — that her mother never makes her do this — her mother always puts her coat on the stroller — my mother — sob — my mother ...

I bend down, by now trembling, and tell her that I don't care what her mother does, nor does her mother do that; if she doesn't carry her coat — I hear myself say — there won't be any hot chocolate.

"I don't want hot chocolate," she screams.

"I don't care what you want, I am not carrying your coat."

I push the stroller on, and with trembling fingers choose from the outdoor display four tomatoes, three green peppers, a bunch of parsley. Joyce stands in full tantrum in the middle of the sidewalk, the jacket on the ground except for one sleeve which she holds in her hand. I push the stroller inside the store, my daughter follows, so does Joyce.

"What's the matter?" someone asks.

"Nothing's the matter," I answer. "She doesn't like her coat."

The cashier smiles sympathetically, but I don't care if the cashier is sympathetic. I pay. The children and the coat follow me back outside. Joyce drags it, but she doesn't leave it behind.

Sickness and holidays intervene, and two weeks pass before I pick up Joyce again. I climb the stairs to her school, pick up her lunchbox and her coat, and we go downstairs together. At the door I give Joyce

her coat and bend down to see to my son in the stroller. I say, "Joyce, you can wear your coat zipped up or unzipped. Which is it going to be?"

Joyce stands by the door, coat in hand, looking down. I feel the ground give way as I face this dark child.

I finish with the baby. "Zipped or unzipped?"

"Unzipped," she says, and puts it on.

It is bitterly cold. The coat slides off her shoulders and blows wide in the wind.

"Are you cold?" I ask. She shakes her head. "I can zip it up for you." Shake of the head.

We pick up Annie from her school and walk several blocks. Joyce is shivering and nothing is said. Annie starts to talk about her approaching birthday. She will be five. Joyce has already had her birthday, three weeks back.

Then Joyce speaks. She says to Annie, "I'm not coming to your birthday and I'm not giving you a present."

Annie looks at me — slow motion towards tears — and I bend down and speak to Joyce. I say that she has had her birthday, and now Annie is going to have hers; you can't say mean things about it; apologize. Joyce is also close to tears. She says she is sorry. Then as I stand up she says something else, softly. The look on Annie's face makes me ask sharply, "What did you say, Joyce?"

"My mother says I don't have to come."

I try to remember what it was like to be lost in such obstinacy. Some days I can remember and some days I can't.

My friendship with Joyce's mother has changed. I lie awake at night talking to her, but in person I say nothing. At night I tell her that I can't stand it any more. I ask her what we should do. Old scenes between Joyce and Annie play out in my mind. But I know Norma has plenty of problems and doesn't need more. And I'm afraid that once I start to recount the things that Joyce has done to Annie, our friendship will never be the same. But it isn't the same now. We talk to each other, ignoring our daughters, pretending these things aren't happening, and each of us is glad when the other leaves.

Joyce makes our friendship unsustainable, and yet it continues. I

continue to pick up Joyce out of loyalty to Norma, and out of my inability to find phrases for what I feel.

Other children live on the block. Linnea lives across the street. She and Joyce have been going to the same school since they were two. Later Linnea's role in the story will become clear to me. It is always clear to Annie.

Annie continues to say, "Joyce is my *best* friend, right? Joyce is my *best* friend."

At her insistence, I take her by the hand up the flight of stairs to Joyce's apartment. I ask Norma if Joyce would like to play.

Norma turns to her daughter. "Would you like to go down?"

"No." The answer is no.

I smile, "Another time."

I hurry Annie away, not up another flight to find another playmate and teach her about the possibility of other friends, the importance of going on, but downstairs and inside. To be especially kind? No, especially irritated. Angry. At being reminded of my own childhood and forced to realize it will happen again.

I begin to invent excuses: they're not home; it's supertime; they're out of town.

I pretend to phone, dialling with one finger and holding the receiver down with the other. "They're not home," I say.

After a few days, enough time so that Annie won't seem to be begging for friendship, I give in and we go upstairs.

The staircase is carpeted and wide. Annie's right hand holds the wooden railing — cool and hard and smooth — and we walk up into the smell of cooking from the floors above, and down the hall to Joyce's door.

"Ring the bell," says Annie.

I reach up and ring it, and I hear Joyce's voice. "Linnea, Mom! It's Linnea!"

Joyce swings the door open and Norma appears at her side. Behind them is Joyce's special tea set, pink and new and never brought out for Annie to play with. I say quickly, "Would Joyce like to come down to play, or do you have other plans?"

Norma hesitates. Then she says, "Annie can stay and play, I don't mind."

Annie, already inside, stays.

It wasn't possible — why wasn't it possible — for Norma to say that she had invited Linnea to play. It wasn't possible for me to say what I knew, and that we would come back another time.

An hour later I returned for Annie. Linnea was there, and Linnea's mother.

Joyce said to Annie, "You can go now."

Norma reproached her. "Now Joyce."

This had been going on the whole time.

"There are different things you can do," I say to Annie. "When Joyce is mean you can tell her to stop being mean. You can tell her you don't like it. You can walk away and climb into a chair and read a book."

Annie has come down from upstairs. She has stopped crying. She is on the sofa leaning her head against my shoulder.

A few hours later I tuck her into bed and she says, "Talk to me more about Joyce."

"About what you can do?"

"Yes."

"You can just walk away from her and play on your own."

She doesn't say anything. She is holding my hand. Then she says, "I don't want you to pick up Joyce anymore."

I look out the window. A yellow taxi is parked across the street and I think of some tragedy, nothing specific, just the general idea of something unbearable and how I might react. The disbelief, finding myself in a situation recognizable from literature, saying to myself — this is Shakespearean. A misunderstanding of such proportions, an incident so earthshattering, as to make one's life like a book worth reading. The thought injects a certain distance, and the distance a certain relief.

But five-year-olds aren't Shakespearean. They can't even read.

On the last day of January I come home, insert my key in the first door to the apartment — the apartment has two doors at either end of a long hallway — and see the farther door swing shut. I go still. My husband is at work and no one is home.

I open the door, look the length of the apartment, and see no one. I find a neighbour on the third floor and together we look through the apartment. I go outside. I see another neighbour and tell her, and once more we comb the apartment. But there is no one. No explanation.

Later I mention it to a friend.

"You saw the future," he says.

What I saw was a triangle of pink: the triangle formed by the doorway and the closing door, and the colour mysterious because the door was brown and the paint in the kitchen was white.

In the afternoon I heard a child's voice in the hallway and felt dismay. Listened — no. Listened — yes. Linnea. Linnea was going upstairs to play with Joyce. I felt such pity, such mortified sadness for my daughter who hadn't been invited. I was transfixed by the pattern repeating itself from childhood. In having a daughter I had rubbed my own childhood into view, and was still rubbing, bent over that worn engraving and rubbing it into view — a picture that emerged through touch rather than sight, and in that way of childhood: knees on the floor, busy fingers, paper and pencil.

I wrote to my mother. In passing I mentioned Joyce. You remember, the aloof and solitary child with a mean streak. I said I had almost come to hate her. That's all.

But as I wrote, my own relationship with my mother — that awkward unhappy thing — came back to mind. My own refusal to please. How else could it be described? I used to sit on the verandah steps and deliberately withdraw. I knew that I had a choice. I could laugh when I was teased and win my parents' approval and my mother's gratitude, or I could sulk and fume. I chose to sulk, though that isn't the best word to describe the combination of fury and helplessness and pleasure which I chose to inhabit because it satisfied me more than cheerfulness, especially cheerfulness as practised by my mother — an unfaith-

ing attitude, a permanent posture. With my mother, pleasing and pleasure were the same.

My mother wrote back. I'm sorry, she said. I caught her tone, the shake of the head, the unspoken "it's a shame." An end-of-the-world tone, useless, completely useless to me.

Where does it come from, this end-of-the-world thinking? The belief that one bad thing cancels out everything else? It must be the panic of childhood retained. So that in the face of one criticism everything else, everything positive, the continuous ground we stand upon, falls away. A slight by Joyce of Annie, a criticism of my husband by a colleague, and the world drops away.

Why do some people retain the sense of a continuous world around them, and others not?

I ask Joyce to wait in her cubby, and I go into the teacher's office which is off to one side. I say, "I need some advice."

The teacher asks me if I have talked with Norma. I shake my head. "She's a dear friend, I'm picking up Joyce to help her out." I shake my head again.

"You may have to," says the teacher, "but there are two other things you can do. You can say to them, 'You don't have to like each other all the time, you don't have to play with each other all the time, but you do have to be nice to each other.' And you can separate them. Put one of them to play by herself in one room, and the other in another room."

The teacher's voice is very loud. I move to close the door tightly, and the teacher continues to talk just as loudly. Doesn't she care if Joyce hears? Does she want her to know she's being talked about? Does she think that will help? She says that little girls, especially, are like this.

We finish talking and I leave her office. Joyce is still sitting in her cubby, her face sombre and unreadable. We go down the stairs and across the street to Annie's school. Every few feet of our progress, I congratulate myself that things are going smoothly, that I am calm, that I haven't given Joyce any rope to hang me with.

The teacher said, "Your daughter needs your protection. You must interfere."



I say to both children, "We have a new rule. You don't have to play together, but you have to be nice to each other." And I set up two spots, the rocking chair where Joyce can go to sit by herself, the sofa for Annie.

When they quarrel I try something I read in a book. I ask each of them to tell me what's the matter. Annie tells me. Joyce won't. I guess what's the matter with Joyce and she nods. Then I tell them to go and sit on my bed. "Close the door, talk it out for five minutes, come back with a solution."

I am amazed when they come back smiling and tell me what they have decided.

I watch them sometimes through the glass door, conferring on the bed. They sit side by side, as though on a park bench, and sometimes they come back after a few minutes and sometimes they remain. But the problem, the quarrel, goes away.

In a few weeks they are closer friends than they have ever been.

They play house, castle, boat, pirate ship, camping. They pull around the furniture in the living room, drape it with old pieces of material, add the little table and chairs from Annie's bedroom; they erect walls with square pieces of old foam and fashion a rooftop from a long flat cushion. The little areas they make are small and beautiful, and often so carefully arranged with pieces of old black lace and rose-covered fabric that they look Japanese. The two of them in combination, not alone, make these places and play quietly for hours.

These little tents of friendship — creative and flimsy, improvised from big and little, different each time — have enough space for just the two of them; they sit under the shelter of an old shawl roof and pour themselves pretend tea.

I watch the two girls become friends again, unable to put my finger on how it happens and aware that everything might crumble again.

It does. Once again Joyce turns against Annie.

It happens one afternoon after two hours of happy playing. Joyce fights with one of her sisters and is sent to her room. But it is Annie she insults. From her bed she yells, "Annie Pinhead." And again. "Annie Pinhead."

Annie hears Joyce. She smiles and walks towards me. A tentative

half-smile that doesn't last.

Norma goes into Joyce's room, pulls her out into the kitchen and tells her to apologize. She won't. Her mother shakes her. She still won't.

"You'll apologize tomorrow then," and pushes her back towards her room.

On the outs. It's almost a crack down the side of your body, a shade you occupy while others sit in the sun. A dark brassiness, metallic, exposed, abandoned to the weather. And yet you choose it and not just because it's familiar. You formulate plans — not plans of action, plans of emotion.

The streetlight comes on and I imagine that Joyce raises her gaze. She looks out the window at Linnea's house and pictures a special tea party, just the two of them, with ice cream and real tea and sugar cubes.

Someone she recognizes — one of the mothers — goes into Linnea's house. Linnea has been playing with Matthew, and now he's coming out with his mother. Tall skinny Matthew has been playing with tall skinny Linnea.

Her mother comes into the room. She is urgent, emphatic, determined, worried. "You can't treat your friends this way," she says, "or you won't have any friends."

But Joyce knows this isn't so. She knows that Annie will always come running.

### 3

My mother comes to visit. One evening she helps Annie with her homework. I lie on the sofa and listen to her soft relentless voice. "What does this say? Sound it out. What sound does this letter make? What letter is it? What sound does it make?"

The soft patience which at any moment will turn sharp. And here it is. "How did you get *that*?"

Annie begins to chew on her hand. She puts the side of her thumb into her mouth, then the side of her hand, making small wet teeth



marks. Her grandmother says, "Don't," and pushes her hand out of her mouth. "It will get sore."

I look at the furniture while this is going on. The light from the standing lamp falls through the mesh on the big armchair and makes a pattern on the soft velvet seat. I don't interfere any more than I interfere with Joyce. I listen, and relive my mother's voice directed similarly at me. The quiz, where the adult knows the answer and you don't. Where the adult pretends she is helping when, in fact, she is testing.

I hear my mother's voice (it is my mother's voice) quizzing my daughter and my mother quizzing me — the pattern has splayed wider — and I feel pain on my child's behalf, and on my own behalf, and on my mother's behalf, since although she appears to be the source of this unreasonable and unnecessary unhappiness, how can she be? Someone came before her too.

In the morning I make coffee, and try to say something that my husband won't dismiss as extreme. I don't say that I feel as if I'm in the presence of evil. I don't say that Joyce is full of raw newborn malice. I say that Annie doesn't seem to have as much stamina as her two-year-old brother. My husband looks at me.

"Don't you remember?" he asks. "When Annie was two she had just as much stamina." And he describes the way she would get up at five in the morning and run around the kitchen with arms held high.

It comes back to me then, a vision of happy exuberance. I feel the size and weight of that plump little body, remember the expressions on her face, and the irrepressible personality. Bright, tough, funny, tender. Now, three years later, here she is. Taller, skinnier, and burdened, somehow, with temperament.

"Her life is much harder and more complicated now," he says. "She's much more aware of the world out there, and she has friendships to deal with."

A phrase goes through my mind. The stress of friendship. How early that kicks in.

When I finally react, I overreact. Perhaps it's because so many peaceful months have gone by. Perhaps that's why I can't bear the

next falling out. It's summer. School has ended. The two girls haven't seen each other for two weeks because my daughter has chosen a day camp that offers swimming, and Joyce doesn't want to swim. Annie hasn't asked to see Joyce until now. She goes upstairs to play, and after twenty minutes comes back. "Joyce told me to leave," she says. And the tears begin.

For the next two weeks Joyce is deliberately cold and punitive. Annie is pensive, but how unhappy it's hard for me to say. I am fierce. I tell Annie that Joyce is not welcome in our home. I say, "Her sort of behaviour isn't allowed."

My husband objects. "Are you sure it's wise?"

But I am strident, determined. Annie has to learn to steel herself. She has to learn what I was never taught. She has to learn not to be taken for granted.

Annie wants to know if we are never going to invite Joyce again.

"Not until she invites you," I say. "Let her take the first step. I won't allow you," I say, "to invite her."

Several times over the next week Annie broaches the subject. We will be on the street and she will say, "We're never going to invite Joyce?" And then she will say that Joyce is her oldest friend and she is Joyce's oldest friend. "We knew each other since we were babies. We've been friends since we were one year old, two years old, three years old, four years old, five years old. Joyce and Linnea are just friends since they started going to school." She is building a faith as she skips along beside me.

We pass a fruit store and she is framed by fresh tomatoes, oranges, the first strawberries. I look down at her and see her trying to soften and reassure me. My attempt to harden her makes her even softer. She is handling me the way she handles Joyce.

A few days later Joyce initiates a visit and it goes completely smoothly, as does almost every visit after that.

When I think back on the whole period, I know that most of the time — eighty percent of the time — the two girls were fast friends. A pattern of intimacy controlled and periodically broken by Joyce. I don't know whether they adjusted to each other or whether Annie adjusted — gave way — to Joyce. Whatever happened was invisible and

miraculous and temporary. They would be down by the river, fishing out leaves, nuzzling a lunch of orange slices on a blanket — grazing, I thought, as I heard their wet little mouths working — and I would be impressed by their diplomacy and affection, by the simplicity and sophistication of their forgiveness. I would feel relieved and wary. Months would go by without a break, months when the friendship was the most stable part of their lives and whatever troubles they had they resolved themselves. And then something would happen.

What happened, I realize, was always the same. Joyce would pull away and Annie would wait for her to come back.

“I wait for the other day,” she told me.

“For another day?”

“Yes. She says she’s never going to be my friend, and the next day she’s my friend again.”

One child knew all about power and the other learned all about patience.

I should have expected the final trouble, but it took me by surprise. A cool summer preceded this last episode. One morning Norma came down with a bag of clothes. All week she’d been packing and setting aside warm things as unnecessary. Joyce was on her heels. She insisted on keeping several things and uncharacteristically her mother gave in. Suddenly there was an area of yielding that hadn’t been there before, an eagerness to compensate for all the upheaval. They were moving south.

I watched Joyce enter this new emotional territory. Her grandmother catered to her more than ever, her parents softened their criticism, friends made arrangements to see her for the last time; they brought gifts, they cried. It seemed to me she enjoyed the narrowing of focus, the paring away of possessions, the simplifying of life even as it became more complicated. This was a process she was adept at, riding a storm in a narrow and purposeful boat.

That summer my daughter learned several hand games. She played them fast and with tremendous merriment. There would be the slapping of palm against palm — knee — shoulder — palm in patterns that were intricate and ingenious and rewarding. Annie’s face was brown and attentive and relaxed.

Joyce was good at not playing; at making you feel foolish for wanting to play.

This would be their final summer together.

Two days before they moved away, Norma and I talked about our daughters. It happened the morning after the going-away party, after Annie's confused sorrow and my relief that there would be no more of this. I walked upstairs and knocked on Norma's door.

Norma was packing. She listened and said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"It's not all bad," I said. "Annie has to learn how to protect herself. She has to learn not to wear her heart on her sleeve."

"But that's the wonder of her," said Norma, and she leaned against the doorway, slender and tired and worried.

The night before, Annie and I left the going-away party early to sit on the lower bunk in her room. It was dark outside. The window was open and the sounds of the party drifted down. It had been raining all day.

Annie listened to my voice — low and hesitant — say that Joyce was about to move and would miss her very much.

She didn't believe me. She said, "She won't even remember me because I didn't sign the book." And she cried quietly.

She meant the guest book. It was on a small table beside the large table of food, and friends had been writing their names, addresses, sentimental farewells. For most of the party Joyce wouldn't speak to Annie. She wouldn't acknowledge her presence. Linnea was there and several of Joyce's cousins. Even after Linnea left, even after the cousins went home, Joyce wouldn't speak to Annie or look at her.

"I know Joyce doesn't like me — she's sick of me — she didn't play with me all night — she won't even remember me because I didn't sign the book."

"You can sign the book tomorrow."

"She didn't even talk to me."

"You know what Joyce is like. You know how nasty she can be sometimes."

"I know she can be nasty, but I don't know *when*."

I sat on the edge of the bunk and didn't know what to do. Should we take Joyce's cue and not bother to say goodbye? Should we wait until moving day and expect her to say goodbye then? Should we let her define the friendship?

This last thought was the one that cut through my anger, and I heard myself suggest that Annie make a going-away card for Joyce.

"Would you like to?"

Annie said she would. The suggestion seemed to relieve her. She put her head on the pillow and fell asleep.

The next morning I went upstairs. My heart felt loose inside me and I said too much too apologetically. It shouldn't be so hard to be straightforward.

Around us was the chaos of the move. Norma was wearing a dress she had intended to give away, but under the stress of the move she had lost so much weight that it finally fit. It looked lovely on her and I said so.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"What if I made a time for them to play together by themselves? Later this afternoon? I'll extend an invitation."

In the afternoon the sisters came down to invite Annie and her brother to watch a movie. They came down first, and then they came down again with Joyce because they wanted to start the movie right away; they wanted Annie and her brother to hurry up.

"Hi Joyce," Annie said with a small and hopeful smile.

Joyce didn't reply. She stood out in the hallway and looked away.

Annie waited a moment and then repeated, "Hi, Joyce."

Joyce, without looking at her, said hi.

Annie looked at me then with the same hopeful smile, but wider, even more hopeful, and full of relief. She was reassuring me that everything was all right.

The next day Joyce's family moved away. In the hour before their departure Joyce and Annie played. Quietly, at first, and on the sofa. They sat side by side. Then they went outside onto the street where the moving van was being filled. They hung on the fence, they ran and scampered and laughed.

Just before they left Norma gave me a card that Joyce had made for Annie but "forgotten" to give to her. Joyce didn't forget to show Annie Linnea's gift of writing paper. This she made a special trip upstairs to get; this she displayed, full of smiles; this she hugged to her chest.

Now I look up from grating a cabbage and see Norma through the window — same hair, same sweater. I start, and the woman catches sight of me and smiles. It's the sweater. A heavy dark brown and white sweater that Norma used to wear in the fall. And the loose thick hair.

I see Joyce too, but not in the same way, or in any way that I could have predicted. I see her in Annie.

A new family has moved in upstairs. One of the children is Annie's age and they are in the same class. In the morning the new girl, Marcela, runs up to Annie and Annie turns away.

Norma at the window, and Joyce in Annie — the absence of a smile, and something more than shyness.

I think of my mother, a woman with no protective shell. She is porous to everyone she meets and this is difficult for them as well as for her. They feel invaded by an innocent country, and she feels taken aback to learn that she isn't welcome. There is no end to her when she is with other people, no solitude. She wants, like a child, to be included and at the centre of everything. And yet this doesn't occur out of egotism, at least not of the usual kind, but out of friendliness; the egotism of the shy perhaps. Not that she is shy, but shyness shaped her, and the desire to be liked.

I have seen my mother treated the way Joyce treated Annie. Seen her greet someone with great friendliness, someone dark and shy and reserved and cruel, and seen that person not respond. Seen my mother repeat her cheery greeting more cheerily: "I said hello." And seen the response: "I know."

A cool and rude young man irked by her overeagerness. It wasn't just his coolness, his rudeness; it was her effort, her inability to be easy about friendship, her obvious need to have people like her. The new girl upstairs has this quality, this willingness to be hurt.

Joyce so small, so concentrated, with those hunting headlights in her eyes, and the highway so wide and dark. Her cruelty took the form of savage silences, calculated and cool and sophisticated. Women treat men this way — men they want to punish, men they want to keep.

"Such a mean streak," Norma said once.

And I softened it, reassured her. We all have mean streaks, she's



not a mean child.

I lied. I hoped. I reassured. I misunderstood. I thought she was a child who didn't suffer fools gladly, a child driven by a principled refusal to please. In her cubby at school she never looked up. Other children raced around and shouted when their mothers and babysitters arrived. Joyce didn't. She wouldn't give me, wouldn't give her mother, the satisfaction of getting what we wanted. She saw the expectation in our faces, however muted, felt it in the stance of our bodies as we waited for her to stand up.

One morning I realized my mistake. I saw her in the schoolground during recess. Her teacher was carrying her on her hip while the other children ran around, and Joyce was playing up to her shamelessly. I had never seen her so happy.

They drove away finally. They moved. And just before moving Joyce took pains to remind Annie who was boss. Don't ever think you don't need me, and don't ever think I need you.

Annie looks for mail every day. She pulls a chair into the hall and stands on it to reach the mailbox. When Joyce's postcard arrives — after days of waiting — Annie sticks it up on the refrigerator door. The postcard says how much Joyce misses her. This is what Annie wanted to hear, all she wanted to hear.

Annie writes a postcard to Joyce. "All I am thinking about is you," she writes. And she says to me, "That's not all I'm thinking about, but that's okay."

A month later she draws a picture of our apartment — the long sofa, the window, the big round overhead light. She writes *shshshsh* across the bottom of the page because, she says, the people upstairs are saying *shhhh*, and the cars outside say *shhhh* when it rains.

I suggest that she send the picture to Joyce but she doesn't want to.

"Would you like to write her a letter?"

No, she doesn't want to do that either. "I wrote to her already."

Joyce in Annie: a more determined child, no less easily hurt but eager to be someone. She sits at the table with her new friends and they compete over who has the most cousins, who has travelled

farthest, who has plans to travel soon, and her face runs with feeling. She shows everyone Joyce's postcard, even as a party we attend brings back memories of the going-away party and sparks the comment: "Joyce did that to me." We're standing beside a table of food, and children are chasing each other through the rooms. "Joyce did that to me," she says. And then, "She was thinking she'd never see Linnea again."

"But why would that make her treat you badly?"

She doesn't answer, and later I ask again. "What made Joyce behave that way?"

"We talked about that already," and her face is flushed — embarrassed — private.

How different we are. Why has it taken me so long to realize? She has never believed that Joyce was mean for the sake of being mean. She has always seen the whole thing as an affair of the heart. She was to Joyce as Joyce was to Linnea.

I dream about my daughter. I have taken her to school, into a room crowded with children, and she won't stay. She follows me into the hallway where I scold her endlessly, all the while aware of what others are thinking. They are thinking no wonder the child is so unhappy.

I see everything in stark terms — a child's capacity for evil, my incapacity to protect my child. I see a fatal flaw, something inherited that my mother and I have never been able to shake — a line of rejection passing down. But Annie (who has the clearest eyes, a man said, that he had ever seen) sees, instead, the nature of love.



## Nicole Markotic / TWO POEMS

### talk-talking

you can't fool me. you suggest we stay up all night. talking.  
except we were. talking. about the movie we just  
saw, about after-death experiences and chemical  
reactions in the brain, about Laurie Anderson, about  
about

the rain just there in the background. mood music. the usual  
postcard lightning until the power blows out for good  
and your roommate (soon to be ex) phones to say your  
basement is full of water

my car without a heater or defrost, we can't see out the inside.  
till water covers our ankles and the road is  
disappeared. disappeared asphalt. we on an uphill.  
so I don't want to rely on a stupid simile or  
anything, but it was like being in a maze and every  
road I attempt turns into tops of cars only

(tomorrow morning  
these roads will be  
splattered with  
bucket seats  
dragged out to dry  
in the sun)

you decide each dead(wet)end to walk and I say swim more like it.  
half the distance we cover is in reverse

your feet on the dashboard, mine dip into mush each time I  
brake. she doesn't know where it's coming from, your  
roommate's voice on the phone, but the walls impart  
liquid. my car is almost an antique. is almost car  
parts. the holes in the floor push the road when it's  
water into our shoes. I refuse to not drive manic.  
not for electric storm. not for you

the movie was about can a person come back after death and be  
the same or is everything changed, altered? can we  
trust our sense of smell? that the sounds we hear  
are words, sentences? you've just come back from  
Vancouver (my words shape your roommate's telephone)

prairie flood. when you were out on the coast, there was a  
shortage of rain. now you're back we plan to stay up  
all night sit on the floor talk movies eat popcorn  
talk movie talk, but

your roommate's voice

my jeans sponge up a new burst of flood. this is crazy, you  
say, there must be a way out, a way *up* from here

but then I can't help it: the high hits me sharp. slap. nirvana.  
I reverse (full speed ahead) half a block both feet  
sunk up to my shins. look out, I say, just when you  
think it's safe to go back into the weather

how can I be ecstatic? what you won't ask

when the roads disappear around us, when months ago my own

world disappeared

(I phoned you in  
Vancouver: this is  
stupid but I can't  
stop crying I've  
been crying non  
stop for five days  
I'm not even sad  
anymore just pissed  
off where the hell  
is all this damn  
liquid coming from)

the plan is to stay up all night. talking

but: thunder and crash part of the. talking. blow up this  
sentence. you not in. Vancouver. except: tonight  
I'm in Calgary. rain matches every. or. you take  
your roommate's words (flood, basement, expectation)  
and hand them back to me. because. BC means  
another province. means rain in winter. means not  
talking about. talking

my tin car goes from water's edge to water's edge. retreat,  
retreat, the weather keeps happening out/in/side the  
car. your roommate's voice. we were talking that  
movie we were yakking up late the thunder as music  
the telephone's voice through the dark of the power  
blows me out of the water slide your seat away from  
not this province and buckets of lightning and  
experiences in the dark. and Laurie Anderson. and  
chemical movies

and now: we drive circles in the rain

## portage

you come back from Québec your face alive. you have discovered  
language. discovered the *inside* of the *other*. three  
weeks later the car smashes into bodies: one. two.  
three. you are the only one facing traffic

on the bus from Vancouver I write you a letter and it feels like  
you, in another language, farther than a phone call  
away. both of us jilted (dumped, punted, whatever) at  
the same time. I stay in the here, spread myself  
north to Red Deer, west to Vancouver; you woo  
airports: Calgary, Toronto, Montréal, Amsterdam,  
Frankfurt. your destination: away. quaint words:  
woo. jilted. destination.

two nights after the accident you show up at [our] place. years  
before the [she]. you can't sleep. no: don't want  
sleep. we wake up and make tea. [he] feeds you  
spiked liquid for hours. your *beau-frère*. that night  
your voice telling the words while I doze and doze

when the car hit, you said, you could see the face of the boy  
driving. the face disbelieving. your co-camp  
counsellors — one in the van, one on the road — watch  
the kids not the highway. the three girls: smack.  
smack. smack. against pavement

in Germany you sign up for *Sprachkurs*, refuse to speak to the  
other English students, take an apartment in town,  
away from the *Universität*. you tell them not to write  
back, you'll be in Switzerland by then

the old airport in Calgary used to be filled with cowboy art. a  
huge wall mural shows the pioneers and Indians  
meeting under a future downtown skyline

all summer I send you postcards from Alta. you disappear on  
paper. disappear from the here. write a new  
language possibility (*Ich kenne. Du kennst*). land a  
job in Switzerland, camp counsellor for rich American  
teenagers. teach them a qualified danger

the spokes from one bike wheel spread over a kilometre apart.  
from the point of impact. how is that possible? the  
police have figured out absolutely everything, you  
tell me. the speed he was driving, the angle of the  
point of impact, how the cigarette burnt his fingers.  
loss of control. he swerved into the shoulder,  
swerved into the cyclists. and out again. if the  
police phone, you say, get the badge number and call  
back. chances are it's not

three cyclists hit; three cyclists dead. the others in shock, no  
memory of impact. you: the only adult facing traffic.  
the car skid 30 metres before it stopped. (*Halt*).  
one body pasted against the front grill. one beneath  
where she slammed into the camp van. one somewhere  
else. you can't help looking around: where is the  
third body?

the great thing about Freiburg is you already speak the  
language. *Deutsch*. no shock of immersion. you do a  
Master's in Sports. *Fußball & Hockey*. in German

the great thing about now is that Europeans want to learn  
American. sports and otherwise. they pay you to  
teach their kids about the Flames

want to hear the funny thing? when [he] told me — I had to be  
told by my soon-to-be-out-of-the-picture — I actually  
heard you dead. the words: all three of them dead.  
and then three long seconds. pre-rhyme of my three-  
day space of disbelieving [he]'s future tense vacancy.  
what can't be true

can't be's

bad movie scenarios. you: with more airports behind you than  
goodbyes. and me: still expecting sense from  
absence. still expecting words to fill up space

three minutes before the impact a diesel truck passed too close  
to the shoulder. too close to your bike trip.  
everyone off the road and onto the grass, you yell.  
terrified of what might have been. what might have  
been: only three stragglers. could have been twenty,  
twenty-five, but you can't trade the degree of loss.  
the face that came home from Québec alive (*c'tait  
incroyable*) stares the driver. he shut his eyes  
before the first hit. didn't see a thing

betweened

after high-school you catch a ride with your boss, Mr. Khumar.  
he wants to see L.A. you drive away from September,  
from paycheques and mid-terms. see ya in a year,  
you tell Mom. then dive into a car and emerge two  
weeks later in front of Matthew's condo. an uncle we  
haven't seen since: crawlings and diapers. a father's  
brother. a confirmed bachelor who's been married  
three times

Mr. Khumar knows a couple who produce movies. cheap thrillers.  
slashers. you stay at their beach house for two  
weeks. twice a day you phone Matthew: ringings. on  
your last day, he picks up. unc? you ask. neph, he  
replies

you meet [she] in a classroom in Calgary. *français* only. summer  
and winter and fall in the Chicoutimi, Québec, Montréal,  
and it takes Calgary for introductions

you came back from Québec and your face was alive. you  
discovered language. the *inside* of the *other*. when  
[she] left, you closed up your eyes and travelled  
Europe. your eyes facing traffic

Christmas Eve you sneak in the basement window and phone Mom  
upstairs. you're in Arizona, you say. you're driving  
on with Mr. Khumar to New York. you miss us. you  
say this will be your first family absence. (*sehr*  
*komisch*) the phone call lasts 20 minutes and then you  
hang up. walk upstairs and into Mom's arms. Merry  
Christmas, you say, what's for supper?

you crawl away from vision as dialect. seeings and wondering.  
helpful hints. you dive into

each year in Québec you plan more and more elaborate tricks.  
(*c'est pas parce qu'on rit que c'est drôle*). visiting games

you phone and say you're coming December 23rd, then  
show up one week before. phone and complain you  
can't afford the airfare, then walk in the door two  
days before Christmas. the last year: you call  
early in December, reverse the charges. tell me  
you'll make it out by the 21st. I say I've learned to  
expect you by the 15th. fifteen minutes later you  
knock on my apartment door. collect call from across  
the street phone booth

the parents of the American girl decide to sue the City for one  
million. this translates into: they sue you,  
responsible adult, municipal employee. in America, we  
place a higher value on life, they say. up the ante.  
they say their daughter is worth more

because brother doesn't rhyme with sister. but in German we  
are *Geschwister*

that time Mom visited you in Montréal. you cycle to the  
airport, intend to put her in a cab facing your place,  
race her home. when you don't find her flight listed  
you grab your bike and cycle to the other airport. Mom  
waits in front of your apartment door and you cycle  
pavement between runways



you pretend ignorance of [she]'s language. because you're  
supposed to be teaching English. no *français* allowed.  
you programme beauty pageants for the guys and  
sleepovers in a bar. [she] hangs around Mom's house  
after classes are over. for weeks and weeks [she]  
laughs at your absence of words

if the police call, you tell us, don't say any words. always get  
the badge #. chances are you're talking to the press.  
assume this: chances are

in Québec you: only hang out with *francophones*, go to hockey  
games (root for the Flames), cross the St. Laurent in  
mid-July (cup your hands for a sip and get cuffed in  
the head — this isn't mountain water, *bloke*), live in  
the Hassidic district, teach English to kids who only  
speak *joual*, eat *poutine*, watch American movies dubbed  
into Canadian *français*, *parle & parle & parle* (your  
face alive)

In Calgary: you cycle everywhere (wear a helmet now), enrol in 7  
University classes (*Deutsch & français*, extra), play  
hockey, coach hockey, go out with your classmates to  
subtitled movies, visit the next-door neighbour who  
bakes you cookies, study and study and then teach,  
grow your hair and beard till Mom

[she] comes for Christmas (the exact day the exact time  
scheduled) and you are lost again. in spite of  
yourself. *belle-soeur*. but: [she] doesn't know  
politics or art or literature, you say. [she] doesn't  
know language. in spite of yourself

my last day in Red Deer I cycle south. one straight highway of  
flat. you make me buy a helmet, make me cycle on the  
left shoulder. cars honk and honk once they're past I  
can't comprehend them. wind and boredom. truck  
drivers wave. a construction worker offers me his  
day-glow jacket. a woman in a pickup offers me a  
lift. the road aimed at Calgary. the asphalt runway  
at the Calgary International you take off from

any visit to Uncle Matthew (now, after your daily phone calls) he  
gives instructions: we should grab our bags and go  
to departures. not arrivals. go to departures and  
he'll absorb us into his car, his air-conditioned LA  
car and drive the 10 minutes to his condo, his air-  
conditioned Playa del Rey condo. you visit once with  
[she] and I fly there three times with [he]. between

Europe: you cycle all over. Switzerland, France, Italy, Croatia.  
visit Dad's relatives, his friends. we were rich, you  
write. send pictures of all the land Dad's father  
owned before the war. before the leavings. you  
cycle back through Austria, back to Germany. pack  
your bike into a box and fly back home

at the airport I tell you about leavings and leavings. about  
[he]'s goodbye (no words, just: *click*). I tell you  
about the thousands of kilometres between here and  
Freiburg—Québec just a speck in between. in the  
between. I tell you about goodbyes

[she] becomes the invisible

the parents of the American girl don't sue the boy driving. he  
is under 17, it was not his car. the parents of the  
American girl purchase the car through several layers  
of buyers. the parents of the American girl don't  
press forward, don't drop the suit. you get to wait  
and wait. write a letter of condolences to all three  
sets of parents. we're glad the last thing our  
daughter ... made her happy, one mother replies. the  
parents of the American girl become the bad guys.  
this is understood. you wait and wait. then fly here  
again from Québec, land into the arms of

two more years of Québec. of carrying yourself into airports.  
when the legal deadline crawls past (the point of no),  
you leave the country: fly into absence

when [she] goes away and doesn't call, you phone Québec, talk to  
the roommate, talk to a brother, speak into an  
answering machine. when [she] goes away and doesn't  
write back, you send envelopes of calendar pages and  
mail-order coupons and special discount flyers. when  
[she] goes away and doesn't, you take me out for ice  
cream: [they]'re both scum, you say. scared of  
words. of leavings. you buy a ticket to Frankfurt  
(*langsam, langsam*), look forward to airports, transfer  
your University credits, fly into language

when [she] goes away, and

JOAN MACLEOD



Joan MacLeod, 15 October 1993

## INTERVIEW WITH JOAN MACLEOD

*The interview took place on 15 October 1993, at the home of Penelope Connell, in North Vancouver. The participants were Joan MacLeod, Penelope Connell, Reid Gilbert, Dawn Moore and Bill Schermbrucker.*

PC I've seen two of your plays, *The Hope Slide*, and *Jewel* because Dawn directed it at the College, and I was quite interested by the use of real fire, and various effects in the play. I found that part where the fire comes on quite stunning, and I wonder in what ways this production I saw was different from that special one in Toronto.

JM Actually it's very similar because the set's the same, because Glynis Leyshon who directed the original at Tarragon also directed the Belfry/Touchstone production, sort of, because the same actress did it in Victoria, so the set came with us from Toronto. Fortunately we had a much better fire effect in Vancouver. In Toronto it was like someone lit their barbecue sometimes — it didn't work a lot of the times. Here we had a co-op student lying underneath the stage, controlling the effect.

PC It seemed to me thematically quite appropriate.

JM Yeah. I wanted real fire — that was very important to me — and I guess it was like one of those things, dogs and children on stage: you can't take your eyes off it.

RG In *The Hope Slide* there's a series of monologues. Do you like them because they're essentially a literary, not a theatrical form?

JM Monologues? For me it's kind of a two-handed thing because two of my plays are monologues, but monologues are also a big

part of my own creative process, because I write monologues for characters, and eventually those become plays.

*RG* So is that for your own development of the characters or for the actors to work up?

*JM* It started at Tarragon where I was in residence, and I had written one scene of *Toronto, Mississippi* and read it in the Playwrights' Unit there, I was a junior member of it, and we all read the scene, and Urjo Kareda the Artistic Director said, "That's all very fine; now I want you to go away and write a monologue for the character Bill," because he felt that was the weakest character of the scene. I said, "Alright," and did it the next week. It was about ten minutes long, just to explore the character a bit, and so I had to present that for the group, and then answer questions from them, remaining in character, and this is quite difficult of course. Judith Thompson was a member of the Unit, and they all asked very tough questions.

*BS* Like what?

*JM* I'm just trying to think. Like, "Are you attracted to Jhana," this retarded girl — which is something I hadn't even thought about. And ... I thought the character of Bill was gay, and I wrote this monologue and realized he wasn't. But he had very strong sexual feelings, and everybody in the play did, and that's what really got him going for me.

*RG* Did that help you, as a woman writer then, getting inside a male character —

*JM* — yeah, it did —

*RG* — because I'm thinking if you thought he was originally gay it's partly because you were also sidestepping his sexuality for your female characters —



JM — that's right —

RG — but if you make him heterosexual, then you have to get inside a heterosexual man's mind and look at these women, which is a little harder to do.

JM Yes, and because I wanted to write a play about this new kind of family, I think this gayness was something I was imposing on the character that just didn't suit the character, didn't suit the voice that I was starting to create. At any rate, since then I write monologues whenever I'm bogged down. In *Toronto, Mississippi* I wrote two more. I never wrote one for the retarded character in the play because I didn't need to; I knew her inside out. And with *Amigo's Blue Guitar* I wrote monologues for every character in the play before I had even written a scene of the play, and got quite ... slick's the wrong word ... I would *really*, really work on the monologues, and some of them have been published and I go out and perform them, as I was explaining to Dawn's class this morning. I'll do an Amnesty cabaret, or readings like I did at Cap College this morning, I'll trot out those monologues and try them out. "Katie," that monologue, I've been doing for about a year. When I'm bogged down I write a monologue, and also as a writer I like writing them, and most writers like writing monologues, whether they're fiction writers (as we discovered this summer) or whatever. There's something manageable and fun about them, and since every writer I know, certainly including myself, is always trying to avoid writing, it's a good way of getting into it; it's a kind of non-threatening way to get in, and they're fun.

RG Because you're only inside one character?

JM I think that's *part* of it. It's an easy way to start out, taking a baby step.

BS How extensively do the monologues become incorporated in the plays?



*JM* It depends on the play. In the case of *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, the first monologue I wrote, which is "Glenda," the character was thrown out three weeks before I got into rehearsal. Throughout the monologue she told me what the play was all about. And there's all kinds of lines that are in the play.

*RG* That's fascinating in terms of the split personality sort of thing, where one of the *personae* of a split personality can be the dominant one who explains the other, explains the reality. It's an interesting thing about the writer's mind — you're opting into the one that's telling you what you're doing, while you also become the others.

*JM* Yes.

*BS* But are they wasted?

*JM* No. In that case it was very useful because you see the monologue, and it's like a little blueprint of the play. I even got the title of the play from there, because someone sings a song in it. So they're not wasted for me at all, because they create a world, and once that world is created, then I can start writing the play. In the case of *Little Sister*, a portion of the "Katie" monologue is still in the play, and it probably needs to go, I'm probably holding onto it, but that's how the play started, so it's very dear to me, but it probably doesn't need to be in there. You know there's bits of ones from *Toronto*, *Mississippi* that are still in there, so they get kind of scattered about. They're most useful as exploration rather than pieces of literature or pieces of the final play.

*BS* Is it a standard device in theatre school?

*JM* Not that I know of. But it's very close to a lot of stuff actors do.

*PC* I wondered if it was difficult to write monologues for so many of the characters, because you find yourself shifting perspective so

much that suddenly you're speaking ...

*JM* That part's easy for me because my work is so character-based. And voice is something I've never had a problem with. The hard part for me is structure. So creating those voices, and *hopefully* getting some sense of the structure out of it is a less scary way for me to work. I have no problem changing voices.

*PC* So you don't fear that the audience will have trouble associating itself with one character, from whose perspective to see others in the play, or that's just not a problem?

*JM* I don't think so. My plays, quite accidentally, are real ensemble pieces in that everyone usually has the same amount to do, and it's usually a ton of work — there's not stars and lesser characters. They're all like that.

*RG* Anyway, it seems a movement away from traditional (or pre-modernist, or modernist) narratology to ask for that simple thing. Your work and the work of people like Judith Thompson effectively prevent you from finding *a* character who will interpret or be the point of view. You don't want that.

*JM* Point of view doesn't exist in contemporary theatre really in the same way. You wouldn't have seen it out here, but in John Krizanc's play *The Half of It* he uses point of view specifically, and I found it very interesting —

*RG* — because it seems unusual now —

*JM* — it's *very* unusual now. I had never seen that on stage before, and I enjoyed it.

*RG* It certainly is one of the things that defines contemporary Canadian theatre, the reaction against point of view, the insistence on non-point of view, as for example in Thompson's work. She *really* prevents a central point of view, where she argues that you

set up these sets of provisional realities, and there is no transcendant reality that you can find — I think that's true in your work too, maybe less so in *Toronto, Mississippi*, but *certainly* in *Amigo's Blue Guitar*.

*JM* It's appropriate that you bring up Judith, because we were in residence at Tarragon together for seven seasons, and I learned a lot from her. I shared an office with her when I wrote *Toronto, Mississippi*, and then for four years we shared a wall — she had the office next to me. And she has three kids now, and she would come in and work two hours a day just solid — she's the most focused person in the world, and I would loiter, and hang out, and try and distract ... she's quite wonderful.

*BS* I was wondering about the "Katie" monologue in particular, where in the second line she corrects herself, and that becomes part of her character. She says: "He comes to pick me up around eight. We're going to a restaurant, no, a bar downtown."

*JM* Yeah, inventing.

*BS* But does that become part of her character?

*JM* I guess a little bit. I hadn't thought of that.

*BS* So that the extempore nature of the monologue feeds —

*JM* — feeds into who she is. Yeah, of course it does.

*BS* And the repetition, the "hands around my waist," where does that come from?

*JM* The shape changes. It gets smaller and smaller and smaller, so that by the end of the monologue —

*BS* — she's a broomstick —

JM — yeah, I want to show it for the tape-recorder: she can do it with her two thumbs and middle fingers, she can make a circle, she's that tiny.

BS There's a kind of liturgy that she says. "He puts his hands around my waist, hands around my waist." It's almost a chant.

JM It's obsessive. She's obviously a very messed up little girl, and I guess that's part of it showing.

RG Isn't there the whole connection — I don't pretend to explain anorexia but isn't it a mixture of some kind of sexual desire and sexual repression? As she wants his hands around her waist she's careful to tell us she has the right kind of bouncy but not too bouncy breasts and so on, so she sees herself as a sexual object, and yet she diminishes that to a broomstick that has no sexuality.

JM Yeah. It's like a refusal to grow up at one level, anorexia, it's not wanting all those womanly curves. Partly she's going: "It's impossible to be a woman right now. I can't work that hard, and look that good." It's a refusal to grow up; to still be Daddy's girl and have a waist that's that small [demonstrates].

RG We must take a photograph of your hands — I think that would be wonderful and insert it in the text!

PC At the same time it's an exertion of power over herself, and other people's perceptions of her. She's quite rigid about creating exactly —

JM — oh it's incredible control, and real disdain —

PC — yeah, and anger —

JM — for people who do not *have* the kind of control that an anorexic will have. In *The Famine Within*, a documentary that I love, which is where the play started, someone talks about an anorexic

being just like a political prisoner, someone on a hunger strike, but not knowing how to articulate what it is they're protesting. And it *is* a great form of protest. An anorexic walks into the room: it's like a skeleton, like *death* walking into the room. And someone's screaming for help, and going: "Don't you dare touch me!" at the same time.

BS When we were talking earlier, Reid used the expression "pulling out issues." Is that what you do as a playwright?

JM I write about things that I care about. They don't feel like issues when I start out, but all of my work is issue-related without a doubt. You could reduce all of it down to, you know ... starting with some kind of social justice issue and then becoming a play about family. And I think part of the reason for the success of my plays is that they're a way of examining social issues through family. But I don't do that intentionally; that's what comes out. Even, the same thing, working with *Little Sister* now, which is about five kids, a lot of it is about family, yet again; that always seems to be —

RG Is that a perception of female artists then, because the collection of female dramatists in Canada at the moment, yourself among them, seem to keep centring the work in family? One hesitates to say it, because it seems such a cliché. Yet the vision, nonetheless, seems to centre in family, even of a newly-constructed family which you're working on, as opposed to the male playwrights who still seem to be playing around with those older male notions of the quest and so on, external to the family. Is that true, in your opinion?

JM Yeah, I think there probably *is* some truth in that. Sally Clark's an exception to that, but not with *Moo* at all. *Moo*'s all about family, and about *her* family. It does feel like such a female cliché, but, yeah, I do think there's some truth in that.

BS You've looked at some obvious social issues like handicapped

people moving into society, or the *Ocean Ranger* disaster —

PC — AIDS —

BS — AIDS, anorexia, widowhood ... what's coming next?

JM I don't know.

RG The anorexia's still happening.

JM Yeah, it should be done by now, but it's not. I don't know. I was saying in the class this morning, I put everything I know into what I'm writing about. Judith Thompson says that too, I think. I don't know what the next play is — I don't know if it's a play or a poem or a novel or what it is either, because I feel equally comfortable in all three of those genres.

PC Do you mean that you research your work or that you live it?

JM A combination of both, Penny. I'll start out usually with something that I know well, that I think other people will find exotic. In the case of mentally handicapped people, or refugees, those were things that were related to me, that I had a lot of experience with, that most people don't know about, and then I also did some research. Doukhobors — same kind of thing: I used a very personal angle on that, which is me being a kid in North Vancouver and thinking Doukhobors were sex objects. "Well that's sort of interesting, I wonder what happened to the Doukhobors?" And then I read all about them, and I got so interested in them I wrote a play about it. So, it starts at a personal place —

PC — seemed *highly* personal.

JM Yeah, we were talking about that, driving here. People always assume my plays are true, they think I'm an *Ocean Ranger* widow. They *always* assume there's a personal connection. It's a combi-

nation of things, I mean I've never met an *Ocean Ranger* widow. I've listened to them interviewed, I've read a lot about it, I have a dear friend who was widowed — her husband died coming home the night he rolled his truck, he wasn't on *The Ocean Ranger*, so you combine those things ...

RG But the controlling figure of *Hope Slide* must be familiar — this is the writer who tours around and reads her monologues here and there, so that's clearly autobiographical.

JM Right. And that's where the play started. I was on a reading tour in the Kootenays a few years ago, and realized I was looking for Doukhobors. I hadn't thought about them for thirty years, not since I went through there with my brother and my parents, and we were madly looking for naked people. So when I was on that tour I was asking around about the Doukhobors, and got curious about them, and then seeing the Hope slide again, I mean they're just such a great story.

RG I'm interested in your saying that you're equally comfortable in all the genres. I have to confess to knowing your dramatic work, I'd like to say *better* than the others, but —

JM [laughs] That's fine! I'm a failed novelist. I'm not saying I'm as good at the other two, but I feel as comfortable.

RG That's what I want to explore. It's interesting to be able to do both, because they seem quite different experiences. I don't know how you can write a novel, and also write a play, unless the play then becomes a novelistic play, but your work isn't; your plays are quite theatrical and visual.

JM But it's by fluke in a sense, because I think both *Jewel* and *Toronto, Mississippi* were sort of written in a closet even though I wrote —

RG — well, *Jewel* is more literary because it's more of a monologue —



*JM* — yeah, but *Toronto, Mississippi*, even though I was in The Playwrights' Unit, so I was kind of checking in with the theatre every few weeks, I had probably been to the theatre about six times in my life when I wrote that play. I had *no* idea about how it worked, and I think simply that my work is best out loud, and I didn't know that when I was a prose writer and a poet. But I was grooming myself for the theatre. I didn't realize that.

*RG* Did you write dialogue better than you write, say description, or ... ?

*JM* Yeah. But the language is strong in my plays, with images and that sort of thing, so it's not *just* dialogue. But when I wrote a novel, I had no problem with that, I didn't think about it, I just wrote it. So there's something about all of that that feels quite natural. Now I look like I'm contradicting myself! I feel in the most natural way that I'm a prose writer.

*BS* What's the novel about?

*JM* [laughs] Partly *Jewel* comes out of the novel, and it was about a woman living up north waiting for her husband to get home from the bush, and then in the play I killed off the husband and made it about something else. It's a real first novel; it was very slow-moving, very introspective. It was how I felt about everything at age 24 or 25 when I wrote it. There were some nice bits in it, but then all of a sudden I became a playwright, and I've had no time to write prose since then — I'd love to go back to it.

*BS* How did that happen? Given that you had only been to the theatre six times —

*PC* — shocking! —

*BS* — tell us, without closing off those other options of being a poet and so on, how have you ended up as a playwright?



*JM* A couple of things. I went to Banff to the School of Fine Arts in 1983, and I was there as a poet. This was when I worked with handicapped people and I had six weeks' holiday, and I would go and do the advanced writer studio that they have, and the Playwrights' Colony ran at the same time, and I met theatre people, almost like that Woody Allen movie where he's on the train, and they're having all this fun in the other car. [Laughter.] And I said "This is a much more pleasant life than prose writers or poets. They get to work with people, they're all really into it, they stay up and drink scotch and talk about life and art. And all the poets look like TB victims." I became very good friends with one guy in particular. It was just a group of playwrights, but there was this one man Alan Williams, who's still a dear friend of mine. He was the first playwright I ever met. He writes monologues and plays, he's an Englishman originally — he got me *curious* about the theatre. I saw him perform some of his stuff, so I went out and wrote a one-person show. And he introduced me to The Tarragon when I moved to Toronto a year later, so it was very haphazard — oh, and also, when I was a poet there, we were all supposed to do a reading, and I was too shy to read my work out loud, and an actor from the Playwrights' Colony did read my work, and it was a long narrative poem about my grandmother or some farm wife, and this actor did it, and she was *wonderful*, and I realized my work is *much* stronger out loud than on the page. So I got to Toronto, and I had written this early draft of *Jewel*, it was just half an hour long, and on the basis of that I got into the Playwrights' Unit at Tarragon, and I wrote *Toronto, Mississippi* there. A year later it went up — my success happened very *quickly*, and all of a sudden I was a playwright, and all that happened in about a year and a half, and then *Amigo's* two years later. I've only written four plays, and now a fifth one coming up.

*BS* But you've won quite important national awards for these plays.

*JM* Yeah. And that feels fortunate. Part of me —

BS — does it disturb you also, to win those awards?

JM No! Because I need the money. It doesn't disturb me at all. I'm very proud of my plays, and I think they're strong, and they might well be what I do best. But part of my soul feels like a prose writer. I met Tennessee Williams when he was in residence at UBC briefly, when I was a graduate student there, and he said he wanted to be remembered as a short story writer, not as a playwright, so maybe it's just something that playwrights have.

RG I think it has to do with privileging of the text over the visual.

JM Maybe.

RG Theatre is so ephemeral. I mean I always like that expression "it goes up" — you used that a few moments ago. Not only does it mean it "goes up," as in "the curtain goes up," but it also goes up in smoke! It's gone, when it's gone. I bet you a lot of playwrights would like to be remembered as short-storyists —

PC — or *remembered* —

RG — only because they would like there to be some concrete document left behind.

JM Yeah. Again — I mean I keep quoting Judith here — it became like a nasty thing with some playwrights even to be published. They don't want to be published. It all just takes place on the stage, and everything's production-oriented. I think that's part of the reason some of Canadian theatre's in rough shape. I don't think there's enough people with a strong literary background. Things get put up very quickly, and they're written by actors out of work, and again — I mean Judith's background is National Theatre School and as an actor, so that all gets proved wrong because she's so wonderful, but also, she says she wants her plays to be literature. She wants them studied as literature, and I feel that very strongly too. I like having a text of my work. I want plays to be both things.

RG I agree with you. They need to be both, I mean that's the whole point of the form. Ideally what you want is the text, and then a video of the play in performance. That's what works best. But it's extremely rare to be able to do that; something like *The Capilano Review* can't do that, although I once posited the idea of including a video in an issue.

JM Oh, did you!

RG I thought it would be quite fun to do a drama issue that did a series of dramatic texts and then had a video that came with it. But I see no other way of solving that problem.

DM Or you get a book like Guy Sprung's *Hot Ice* which documents the production.

RG Yeah, well we did one of those once, in issue #35.

PC Yeah we did, we had production photographs. We traced the whole rehearsal process, and there are sketches and pictures and so on, but still, we were creating a historical document — again it's literary.

RG And I *absolutely* agree with you that too much Canadian theatre is just up in a minute and improvised in expression. Do you use improvisation at all, or do you want it all to come out of the text?

JM No. I don't know how to work that way. I'm a real control freak. I had to do this nightmare cabaret a couple of months ago, where an audience gives you different elements and you have to write a play in an hour, and I was just *awful!* *Just awful!* What I came up with was just trash!

BS Why did you have to do it?

JM Because I said I'd do it. It was a benefit thing. It was all amateur actors. And then these actors have to perform it. And one of

the actors asked me if I'd ever written a play before. He thought what I'd done was so awful. I said, "Ah, you'll audition for me one day and I'll get back at you!" But it was a miserable experience. Yeah, I don't work well that way. It takes me two years to write a play; I'm a very slow, careful writer.

PC What's your longest work?

JM *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Amigo's* are both full length plays, over a hundred pages. *Little Sister* is a one-act, but it's a long one-act; it's going to be about seventy pages when it's finished.

DM When you say it isn't finished yet, what elements aren't finished? What's the end for you? Is it scenes, or refining —

JM — there are four drafts. The ending's right, I just haven't quite got there in the right way. There are things that need to be fleshed out. It's the oldest thing in the world that you tell creative writing students: show me, don't tell me. I still have to do that to myself. I'll read it, and I'll just panic that all the dramatic moments are referred to, and not *out* there. You just don't know sometimes. So, we'll see. I'm fooling around with it. I'm also having a hard time letting go, giving it away.

RG Is it in any kind of workshop? Raising again the idea that you need to *see* it before you can revise. Or is all happening in your mind?

JM I heard it when I wrote a first draft last January; I heard it out loud in Toronto; we workshoped it for the one day. We're auditioning for it in two weeks, and I'll go just so I can hear the actors fool around with the words. I'll do another draft before I go because it opens in January.

RG Here? Or Toronto?

JM It opens in Toronto, and then it's also here in March at Green

Thumb. So it's touring to high schools.

BS So can you make a living as a playwright in Canada?

JM Well I did. For five years I lived off royalties.

PC Wow! Five years!

JM Almost five years.

BS Exclusively off royalties?

JM Pretty well.

BS And performing fees or something?

JM Same thing. By royalties I mean theatre royalties. Not book royalties believe me! I sold TV rights for *Amigo's Blue Guitar*, so I include that — that was a good chunk. *Toronto, Mississippi* especially got picked up by some big regional theatres. In three weeks I made \$28,000. I'd never made \$20,000 in my *life* in a year before, and I lived off that, and was very careful with the money, and because of that, got to write whatever I wanted to for five years, which was a real *privilege*, you know, it was wonderful.

RG And also quite self-satisfying, I mean actually to be living off your own work. To know that you've made it for yourself.

JM It felt *great*. And that people get work out of it. I love thinking how many people *Toronto, Mississippi* has employed; that makes me feel great, actually. But that's unusual, and now, with my last play, *Hope Slide*, a one-person show, I make a tenth of what I do on the other ones. But I'm really glad I'm back to a one-person show. I wrote it just for the joy of writing it, and it's a poetic piece. I didn't want to try and repeat *Toronto, Mississippi* and *Amigo's*. Again, moving from Toronto back home to Vancouver, it's very much wanting to be a writer and not just a playwright. I

like the theatre, but the world's a big place, and the theatre can become a very tiny world.

BS What do you find most difficult as a playwright?

JM I guess letting go of the work. It is a collaborative venture, so handing it over to the actors and the director and everything — yeah, it takes me two years, and an actor might not *get* it the first two days, and they're — I'll need to change things — and that's very hard.

BS Does that lead to conflict?

JM Oh sometimes. With the exception of *Hope Slide*, which was a very easy rehearsal, I've never been in rehearsal where there weren't tears from everybody. Being in residence at Tarragon for so long, I'd be in my office and then you go into the bathroom, and there's some actor crying their eyes out. It's a very human venture, and a very vulnerable one, lots of conflict.

PC So you're let down on closing night?

JM Oh, it's terrible. I'll tell you the worst is when the run of the play is over and you go in there the next day and they're tearing — no, not the next day, that *night* they're striking the set, and it just feels *awful*. Especially with *Toronto, Mississippi*, my first one, because I didn't know if there'd ever be another production. Because it was a Canadian play, I just assumed there wouldn't be. And you just think Ahh! you've put so much into it —

BS — it's dead —

JM — and it's just so important to you, and it's gone. With *Amigo's* I knew before the play closed that we'd already lined up six productions or something, so I knew it had a life. But *Toronto, Mississippi* I didn't know, that first one might be the last.

*RG* With multiple productions, what is it like to see different directors' interpretations, different responses to the work?

*JM* That's also the hardest part of the theatre! It's hard. Most of the time actors make you look very good, it's quite wonderful; at other times it feels terrible.

*BS* So you can sympathize with Shaw for writing his elaborate prefaces?

*JM* Yeah right. It's hard because you feel responsible for everything at that moment when the curtain goes up, the show goes up! You have no control at all, but you feel kind of responsible for everything.

*BS* Have there been any performances you've wanted to disown?

*JM* Oh of course. That always happens. I've never seen a performance, however, where I didn't think the actors were really committed, and the director was really committed. I think if I saw a sloppy version, you know, if they were lax with the lines, that would be hard to take, but I've never seen that. I've seen interpretations I didn't agree with, but they did it with their whole heart, and probably did it for \$360 a week. Most of the time it's just fine. Usually what happens after your play's been around for a while, you know, I'll go and see it in Winnipeg, you fly in for the opening and do some publicity, you watch the play, and you go to the bar with the actors afterwards, and they have one beer, and they go, "What d'you really think?" All that is very hard. I'm getting better at that. Always try to find ways to be supportive.

*PC* They don't really want to tell you what they really thought?

*JM* Oh yeah, you get some of that.

*DM* Are the actors ever right about a change?



*JM* Yeah.

*DM* Or is it just — you said a couple of times, they don't know, they haven't been around the play as long as you. Do you ever re-write —

*JM* — for actors? Sure I do. No, they're often right — and often wrong. It's a real push-and-pull kind of thing. I *like* that. I like it when an actor becomes very possessive of the part very quickly. It's a good sign, I think. Actors have played very significant roles in the writing of all my work. Also, working at Tarragon for so long, and premiering there, we have a week of previews, we have extended rehearsal, so that we can really work on the text; so the actors are very useful to you during all that process. It's designed so that we *can* rewrite. Again, I think that's a big problem with theatre in Vancouver, that you don't get a week of previews usually, and you get a three week rehearsal, and it's just death to new work, it really is. If my plays went up after three weeks, with no previews, they would be entirely different plays than I have now. I feel very *badly* for the writers here.

*RG* Joanna Glass is premiering a new play in the Playhouse, and they're working on that now.

*DM* Canadian Stage First.

*RG* Yeah. And she's getting a longer go than usual, I think, at working it over.

*JM* Good.

*RG* Another hassle of writing plays as opposed to writing fiction (where theoretically you just need a word processor or a pen) is how much do you think your writing is conditioned by the realities of budgets, and how many actors you can have, and what kind of set they're going to be able to give you, and so on? The cost of production.



JM I think *my* work will be small, intimate, no matter what. I think that's what I do best.

RG Because of your interest in monologues?

JM Yeah.

RG So anyway you tend towards the one-woman show, or two-hander?

JM Yeah, or four. I mean *Amigo's* has five, and I just think that's epic.

RG So you don't have a desire to do a big eighteen-character —

JM — no. I don't think my kind of writing style suits that. Well, you know people like Sally write big plays, and do that very well —

RG — but they're hard to get staged.

JM They're *very* hard to get staged, and you know I saw *Love of the Nightingale* at UBC a few nights ago, and I just loved it. I love Timberlake Wertenbaker. I was saying to the class this morning that was such a good choice for a university show because it's a big cast, and it's controversial, so that pretty well guarantees it'll not be seen in our big regional theatres, and *what a pity*. Playwrights in this country are writing for casts of under five because you know you don't have a hope — and I think that's a real pity, because when you see *Nightingale*, you just realize how *good* it can be, and what people could do.

BS How big's that cast?

JM Fifteen or something.

DM Yeah. Five in each chorus, and then some.

RG But then you get the flip side of that, you see the academic theatre can do that and *does* regularly — we did a Timberlake Wertenbaker play last year — how many in that cast, big cast?

DM [laughs] I've mercifully forgotten!

RG But in the academic theatre then you get student actors, so you get the down side of that.

JM And also you can't make a living. Playwrights, we live off the box office, and amateur rights and professional rights are a whole different ball of wax, and you *want* your work to premiere professionally. You want to get the reviews. And you want the country to know about it. So that's the hard part. In other places isn't there the tradition of some universities commissioning playwrights well enough to write for them? That doesn't happen here, that I know of.

BS It happened at Cap College.

DM Uh-huh.

RG We commissioned the piece, but not at the level you're talking about of a professional performance.

JM I mean, you're not going to commission me to live for a year to write a play for you. People live a month on two or three thousand. You have to be realistic about that stuff. Yeah, I heard about Peter Elliot Weiss's *Journal* project — well, you were telling me, Dawn.

PC It was good.

DM Yeah, "Hollow Years." A student wrote about his sister being anorexic.

BS Well, what haven't we covered?

*JM* I want to talk about postmodernism and deconstruction ...

[at this point the interview disintegrated into a joke, scuttlebutt, and baffling conundrums of mistaken identity]

excerpts from *THE HOPE SLIDE*



Touchstone Theatre Production, Vancouver.  
Actor: Leslie Jones





Touchstone Theatre Production, Vancouver.  
Actor: Leslie Jones



Touchstone Theatre Production, Vancouver.  
Actor: Leslie Jones



*The Hope Slide* was first presented by the Tarragon Theatre, Toronto in March 1992 with the following:

*Irene:* Sarah Orenstein

*Director:* Glynis Leyshon

*Set & Costume Designer:* Sean Breough

*Lighting Designer:* W.F. Gosling

*The Hope Slide* takes place during one night in the Kootenays, a remote and mountainous area four hundred miles east of Vancouver, in 1990. During this night Irene travels from 1962 to 1967, from North Vancouver to the Doukhobor prison outside the town of Hope, from the turbulent Kootenays of the early sixties to the other side of Hope where a mountain collapsed in 1965.

The original set was a stylized interpretation of a burnt out school house, on a fairly steep rake with a scrim triangle dissecting the set upstage; Irene pushed against, played against this scrim during the three Doukhobor monologues. For Irene's final protest toward the end of the play we did use real fire — the flames came up through a grate upstage.

The running time is approximately eighty minutes. There is no intermission.



*(Lights up on the adult Irene, thirty-seven years old. It is the middle of the night, in the Kootenays, January 1990. Irene is sitting in a comfortable chair, wrapped up in a quilt.)*

My first version of girlie pictures were these grainy photographs of Doukhobor women that my brother cut out of the *Vancouver Sun* and kept in a drawer behind his socks. This long line of big bums and kerchiefs. We were United Church so all this was pretty exotic, sexy as hell. When I was very little I thought Doukhobor meant untidy but then I started thinking they were true heroes because they didn't send their kids to school and when they were really pissed off they burnt down the school altogether. School was always a horrible place for me. My marks were terrible; I had the attention span of a flea.

Wanna play teenager? This used to be my favourite game. We'd roll up our skirts, smoke cherry bark and run around kissing one another. Wanna play Teenage Doukhobor? It's the same idea only the one who's it has to take off her pants. I was a very religious child. I used to light kleenexes on fire and pray that Elvis would come, come to my house for supper. My parents would be out and all our furniture would be different.

In the seventies my friend Walter and I lived communally in the country and at first we attempted to organize our community on Doukhobor philosophy. We would have a meeting every Sunday, we would share household chores, men and women side by side and any money made outside our quarter section would go into a communal kitty. The system began to break down when none of us wanted to work at regular jobs, in fact none of us wanted to work period. Walter's definition of housework included braiding his hair. Walter was also completely in love with this really obnoxious guy called Peter who was one of our house mates. This divided us further. Then there was this poor cat who froze to death in a well, who later showed up as a shoulder bag and beret. This was a simpler time, a hopeful time. I was working with puppets — everyone was working with puppets — I still bought all my footwear at the House of Clogs.

January 1990 and I am travelling through Doukhobor country, through the Kootenays. I am a full-fledged actor, I am an actor on tour, solo, bringing my own one woman show to small places — three voices for the price of one. The characters I play were real people, ghosts I have stolen and made speak. Doukhobors. These are hard times and I am proud to be working. I am billeted with English teachers in interior towns; I eat surf 'n' turf with the head of the Chamber of Commerce. I arrive by bus, one a.m., exhausted and dying for a cigarette.

"I hope you like kids," a nervous mother asks me while handing me a towel. "Absolutely," which is true. "Our little ones are up pretty early." I assure her that I am both an early riser and a heavy sleeper — both lies.

I am exhausted but hyper, lying in a top bunk between Wayne Gretzky sheets — staring down at a No Smoking sign the size of my head. I climb down the ladder and into their strange living room. Through the window the great terror of mountains at night, a river beginning to freeze. I love my country — so beautiful and wild. My country is disappearing.

When the Doukhobors lived here they tried to create a heaven on earth. Forty of them living under one roof, families sleeping in long narrow beds, toe-to-toe. Everything was shared and because of this they prospered. As a girl they were heroes to me — model anarchists and rebels. Their expulsion from Russia I linked directly with my being expelled from Junior High School. Truant officers were the bane of their existence — well me too. I envied the Doukhobors many things but most of all I envied that they had a community.

I have a community now, I have the theatre and my community is under attack. The Minister of Revenue has just suggested a more "hands on" approach to funding the arts. I suggest we all lay our hands directly on the Minister of Revenue. But this is nothing compared to the real enemy.

The moon is full, the stars close and sharp looking, metallic, explosive. I prop open the sliding glass door so that I can sneak a cigarette. The air is very cold and clean. I am tired and I realize stupidly that I am down here because I am afraid to sleep, for the first time in years I am afraid of the dark. No more. No more funerals. Although I know many young men who look ahead with remarkable bravery, for many of my friends hope has become a threatened species, with a bowed head and awkward feet, cold and trembling. Terrified.

*(Irene lights a candle and speaks in the voice of Mary Kalmakoff, twenty-four years old, 1965)*

I am pushing out against something. It is thin but tough — a strong piece of skin or good cotton sheet. And then I am through, above the buried car. I see my friends beside it — blood-spattered and still. I have special sight: I can see through the dark, the snow. It is three a.m., January, and we were driving through the mountains. Avalanche I am thinking now, this is an avalanche because snow has come right through the roof, filled up the convertible. Everything is still. I push through the rocks and snow and boulders of ice as though they are air. Travel through all this cold like a vein of boiling water. My skin should be scraped raw but it is clear, white and warm.

Stupid. I am pushing the wrong way, a stupid little mole that means to rise up and out of the mountain but instead aims for the heart, the centre of the earth. Then suddenly I am in the air again and tumbling down, the mountain tumbles with me and I understand what has happened, the mountain has cracked — its whole face and front side fallen, buried the road and the valley, left the mountain half-gone and naked. It seems fetal, ridiculous, unborn. I understand now too that I am dead and never to be found. Lost outside the town of Hope. Me. Mary Kalmakoff, twenty-four years old, unmarried. Employee of the Penticton Fruit Growers. Religion — Doukhobor.

*(Irene is fifteen, a few months later, she is talking to her truant officer.)*

First off I want it made perfectly clear that reporting to you, Miss Toye, a truant officer-slash-psychologist, is a complete violation of my rights and all I hold sacred and dear. The form in front of you was signed under duress, a condition of my being allowed back in school that I was forced to agree to. I was backed into a corner, the pen practically jammed into my hand. Although I am not against education per se I believe attendance should be voluntary; cramming something down one's throat is hardly the way to inspire learning.

My understanding, Miss Toye, is that I am to report to and talk to you, my truant officer-slash-warden, personally once a month and that if I am absent from school without a phone call and note from my mother or the queen mother or God himself then I am going to be expelled again. I agree to these conditions although it is with a heavy heart that I am agreeing. I also agree to keep my clothes on at all times, even in gym class I will wear my shorts over my stupid dress to avoid causing any further rioting amongst the members of my class. But although I am no longer allowed to protest publicly, I want you to know Mary Kalmakoff, Harry Kootnikoff and Paul Podmorrow are still heroes to me, unsung martyrs whose song I intend to keep alive come hell or high water.

These were real people who died an unjust and horrible death. How'd you like a mountain to fall on your head Miss Toye? Or a bomb to explode in your lap? How'd you like to go on a hunger strike to get publicity but once you died nobody paid attention? The newspaper didn't even say it was sad. And this is absolutely the saddest thing that I think has ever happened but I do digress.

I would like you to write down right now that I, Irene Dickson, am absolutely thrilled to be back in school and that the idea of doing grade nine all over again is extremely exciting to me. I am turning over a new leaf, knuckling under and disappointment is no longer a part of my life. I see this September as a new starting point on the rocky and difficult road of the life of Me — Irene Dickson. You got all that?

What are you writing down? Everything on the form in front of you is totally true .... Except the part about my parents being divorced. It was an experiment I devised to see if people treat you any better if you come from a broken home. They don't. My parents get on like a house on fire, always have. The part about future occupation is true: dancer-slash-actress-slash-mayor of a great city. Present occupation: spirit wrestler. Meanness and forgiveness are growing inside me at an equal rate and creating an unholy war.

If you're going to write stuff down about me I think it is my right to see it .... Does it say there I have these theories? I.e. — last year I predicted North Van was going to slide into the ocean and settle like Atlantis under the Lions Gate Bridge. I also have several theories on hitch-hiking, sex and friendship, drunken boys, the end of the world and, of course, the Doukhobors. Take your pick.

...Okay, don't take your pick. Wanna talk about sex? No problem, anything goes here, I am an open book. Perhaps you are under the mistaken impression, along with the rest of this place, that Walter Dewitt is my boyfriend. That Walter Dewitt and I are doing it. Well we're not. I do not see Walter in that way. He is my friend, my best friend, as a matter of fact, my only friend. You know Walter. He is very skinny and very bright, highly goofy. And, like myself, highly persecuted, my tribe. Walter and I believe friendship is the absolute highest state of being. (*pause*)

I like your hair. I believe women should have long hair, another one of my theories. In pre-historic times our hair was long so that babies, our babies, could hold on while we ran through the trees being chased by God knows what. Babies are born knowing how to hold but now have lost it and have to be taught. No. They come out knowing but forget and have to be taught. I don't know. But something has happened with babies and their ability to hold on in this century.

I don't mean I don't ever think about sex. I think about it often. Perhaps constantly. Not the actual act of sex which is as yet unknown to me but I do think of my policies regarding sex. I.e.— do everything

but, you know, as many times as you want with whoever you want, just KEEP YOUR HYMEN INTACT. When I first learned of my hymen and the importance of keeping it untouched, in place, I imagined this big shield I could hold out and ward off guys with, rather like a Viking would have. It's a great word hymen — hymn and amen and hyena all rolled into one. This big bouncy kangaroo thing that laughs its guts out. I mean I know it isn't that and I know it isn't something that you carry with a spear but I used to also worry that my time will come, I will meet HIM and it will be perfect and holy and wild but ... what if my hymen didn't break? What if guys just sort of bounced off it? This tough old piece of skin pulled tight as a drum, a bongo drum barring the way to heaven. What if it leaves men in pain, pain is something they cannot bear nearly as well as us. They also have a great deal of trouble touching their own eyes.

Don't write that down! Just write down stuff like I am knuckling under. I love that kind of crap. I am knuckling under. I know, I know. Our time is up. Tell me about it.

*(Irene is fifteen, talking to her truant officer, one month later)*

"Lighten up. These are the best days of your life." My friend Stan is always saying stuff like that to me, stuff designed to make me feel better that usually makes me feel like jumping off the nearest roof. Stan is the daytime security guard at the Marine Building which means he does zip. He is supposed to rid the building of kids like me but he doesn't. You know the Marine Building, right downtown, very old and sort of like the Empire State Building, like King Kong's going to be up top waving someone like you, Miss Toye, around in his fist. I consider its lobby to be my second home, my home away from home, my sanctuary. Stan is sixty-seven and used to be a farmer so he knows a thing or two about force-feeding. Stan believes, no matter what, the government should've kept Paul Podmorrow alive. I don't know. I mean Stan



is no intellectual but I do grant him his point of view.

Do you have a problem Miss Toye? Exactly what is your problem ...? One day. I only missed one day of school. And I didn't DO anything. I'm trying to come clean here. I just hitched overtown and hung out with Stan at the Marine Building, end of story. When the strains of life and grade nine are too much for me, to the Marine Building I go. I am trying to explain to you, Miss Toye, some of the issues with which my mind grapples — life and death issues. Grapple, grapple.

And sometimes these issues keep me away from school and I don't like it any better than you. I was NOT running away again. I learned my lesson last year. I do not run away anymore. I face the trials of life head on. Even when I am deserted by all, I stand my ground. Antlered and weary, Irene Dickson, that is me.

Stan thinks I'm seventeen and that I'm a junior temp secretary for MacMillan Bloedel just up the street. I have no idea why I'm such a liar. I just am. I told the guy who gave me a ride home that I'm the youngest ever law student at UBC. I mean THE TRUTH is a very important issue to me but I mean in a general sort of way.

Okay, alright, I want to get this out. I also want you to swear yourself to secrecy, undying secrecy, Miss Toye. Agreed? I lied to you and everyone else about living with the Doukhobors. I didn't actually live with them. I just sort of visited last summer. Briefly. Very briefly. I went all the way up there, to the Kootenays, eight hours in a semi but the Doukhobors were not all that happy to see me. Or to be more precise they ordered me off their land which is a complete joke because they aren't supposed to own it in the first place.

But I just keep banging on the door. I am crying and making a fair amount of noise. Probably when they can't stand it any longer, they do let me in.

They are not proper Doukhobors. They are eating canned ham and watching *Car 54* on television. The world is full of phonies. These

particular phonies have phoned the police to come get me.

I spend a terrible night in the home of the chief of police of Grand Forks. We're eating breakfast; the whole family is exhausted because I was awake the whole night and not exactly quiet about it. Despair is far too quiet a word for how I usually feel.

"Hey, you wanna see a real Doukhobor village?" The police chief is tapping me on the shoulder. And I say okay, that'd be alright, I'm pretty excited even. So off we go.

We drive for half an hour; very pretty country, snow-capped mountains etc., you expect to see Heidi and the whole gang around every corner. I am thinking of turning myself over to the Doukhobors, seeking asylum, as they say. He parks the car in the middle of nowhere.

There is a gnarled old orchard and part of a barn. "Right up there," the chief points. A chimney, the black foundations of a house. "Used to be forty or more all crammed together under one roof, kids, husbands and wives; everyone married to one another and switching around ...." There is fireweed everywhere, other black marks on the ground that must have been woodsheds, stables .... The horseflies are glinting like fish and biting me. It's a stupid place and it's horrible, too quiet. It is the saddest and stupidest place on earth.

Sometimes I live in the country  
Sometimes I live in the town  
Sometimes I get a great notion  
To jump in the river and drown

God I hate that song. *Goodnight Irene, Irene goodnight, goodnight Irene*. It is the most depressing song ever written but most of the world is nuts about it including my mother. How'd you like to be named after the most depressing song ever written, except even worse no one knows it's depressing, they sing along like it was *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*? No one ever pays attention to anything. Undoubtedly everything you are currently writing down is unimportant.



Irene goodnight, Irene goodnight  
Goodnight Irene, goodnight Irene  
I'll see you in my dreams

My parents come that afternoon to pick me up. They're not angry, it's way worse than that. They're just VERY DISAPPOINTED. They have brought Walter with them as a way of cheering me up.

He has this little booklet thing with him on the Hope Slide which he must've bought on the way up. He reads to me from it: "When Bill the trucker kissed his wife goodbye that cold and dark January morning, he took a bag lunch of corned beef on brown, his favourite, and said see you later. Little did he know that tonnes and tonnes of rock would cut short his journey and his life."

Well the real thing is even worse than the book. We stop to look at it on the way home. The road just stops and there's this huge pile of rocks and mashed up trees. You can't imagine it. It goes on for miles. But the worst part is the mountain that fell down, highly unnatural, like this big foot just kicked its face off.

Walter finds it all fascinating. "This is the end, this is the beginning of the end," I tell Walter. "Irene give it a rest." Walter is sifting through the rocks and explaining — "There were two small earthquakes creating a crack in the surface. It is an act of nature. It doesn't MEAN anything."

"Mary Kalmakoff is buried here. She might be right under our feet." Walter is ignoring me. "Hers was the only body not found. Don't you find it rather interesting that ten miles on one side of Hope is the prison built specially for the Doukhobors, the place where Paul Podmorrow starved to death. And here, ten miles on the other side of Hope, a mountain falls down and a Doukhobor girl is buried, don't you find stuff like that incredibly weird?" "Not particularly," Walter tells me.

"Did you know the Doukhobors don't seek converts? They don't care

who you are. They just want to be left alone. Walter! I'm talking to you. I'm trying to tell you they didn't want me, I wasn't allowed in, and I want in, somewhere .... I want to be right in the middle of something. I feel as though all great events in history happen just before I arrive."

"You could never be a Doukhobor anyway," Walter tells me. "Why?" Walter is carving his name into the rock, sometimes I really hate him. "Because, Irene. You're just too bossy." I promise then and there never to speak to Walter Dewitt again for the rest of my life. But on the other side of Hope, Walter starts talking to me:

"We will build a city. A great and wonderful city. A dome will protect us from the elements, from war, from all possible danger." And then Walter looks out the window and he sees that city. I can tell by his face that once again he is seeing what's invisible to me. What is it? What do you see?

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KATIE (a monologue for *Little Sister*)



Theatre Direct Canada, Toronto. *Little Sister*

Actors (l to r): Tamara Gorski, Sanjay Talwar, Laurie Fraser





Theatre Direct Canada, Toronto. *Little Sister*  
Actors (l to r): Tamara Gorski, Sanjay Talwar, Kim Kuhteubl

## KATIE

HE comes to pick me up around eight. We're going to a restaurant. No. A bar, downtown. It's hot. I'm wearing a very short skirt, pink, and this top that shows off my stomach which is suntanned and ripply, hard tight: perfect. Because I am beautiful I don't have to wear much make up. I have this long swan neck and hair that's big and bouncy and requires no work whatsoever. My breasts are also big but not too big and not at all bouncy. The guy I'm with laughs a lot and is rather shy because I'm so good looking. We are drinking beer. No. He is drinking beer and I am drinking diet coke. No. Perrier with a slice of lime. Forget the lime. When he drives me home he kisses me on my porch, on my mouth. His mouth tastes like salted peanuts. He puts his hands around my waist.

*(Katie makes a circle with her hands; every time she says this phrase the circle becomes smaller.)*

He puts his hands around my waist. He puts his hands around my waist. I am perfect.

The boy I speak of lives on a billboard. The girl I will become lives on the billboard too. They are in technicolour and thin as paper. I jog by them every morning, used to think about this guy quite often, practice kissing etc. with his face in my mind. Now I don't think of boys hardly at all. It is six-thirty. The air just getting light. I love this time of day — I am part of something, of the others up this early. We are all full of purpose: have miles to jog, dogs to walk, cars to start. Everything feels possible. The day ahead can be managed and arranged. I always jog

before breakfast. I used to get up at seven and run for thirty minutes. Now I get up at six and run at least an hour.

When I get in from running there is ten whole minutes when I'm making my lunch and lunch for my little brothers when it's just my dad and me in the kitchen, except for the *Globe and Mail*, he is all mine. "School okay?" I nod. I have, in fact, the highest grade point average in the tenth grade.

I take the bread out of the bag for lunches, spreading six slices on the counter. The bread is soft and big and brown. I cover the bread with butter then peanut butter on top of that. It's the kind of peanut butter that you get at the health food store, a slick of oil across the top.

Then I slice up bananas and pile them on. Then four Hey-Dey cookies each in little plastic bags and a box of apple juice with its own straw for each of my brothers, a big red apple for me. I put the lunches into bags made of recycled paper. I don't jog to school. I get a ride with my mum. I get out a block before school so that no one will see I am with my mother. I am half an hour early so I study right until the bell.

In art class we make fish out of balsa wood. Bend the wood into arcs of fin and spine then join them together with a pin and cover the frame in tissue paper. My pin doesn't hold and the wood goes catapulting across the room. Imagine your own bones springing out of your skin, your own self catapulting out of your body forever. I retrieve my wood across the room. Everyone finds my flying fish hysterically funny. My mouth tastes like it's made out of aluminium foil. I eat a tic-tac, carefully. I have always been frightened that if I chew anything hard my teeth will crumble.

My cousin Petie has rotten teeth. I should know. He taught me how to kiss. Because he is from a farm he also taught me how to drive when I was nine and how to blow up apple trees. Now he is sixteen and I am always two years younger. Last summer he put his hands around my waist. He put his hands around my waist and gave me a pinch. "Katie's still got baby fat. What else has Katie got?" He looked down the front

of my shirt and through some trick made his voice boom and echo. When we were ten and twelve we used to steal my uncle's car and drive across the fields and smoke a cigarette. This was heaven. Then Petie would look for something to kill — a groundhog, a partridge, a crow. Now Petie steals the car and drives across the border and into Quebec. French girls are better, thinner. French beer is better too. So long Petie.

I've always eaten my lunch in the girl's washroom. The cafeteria is a rather scary place and for many girls I think this is a good solution. I always sit under the tampax machine. I have never had a period and I think by sitting under the machine this will somehow help. I realize this is not very logical but as far as I know I am the only girl in my class who hasn't started.

I take the sandwich apart. I scrape all the peanut butter off the little slices of banana and eat them slowly. I then eat the crusts around my sandwich avoiding the peanut butter. I do not even look at the cookies. I leave them in the bag. I take four bites of the apple. Yesterday I took six so today is better. Then I throw everything into the trash can in the corner. Let's do lunch.

The last class of the day is modern history, which is hardly modern. We have been on World War II since October. On my way to class I feel clear as spring water, clear as glass and it's like that moving though the halls, floating, propelled from underneath, the air around me enclosed, I am moving in a glass box. Although I am used to feeling a little removed from things this feeling is different, physical, charged. I take my seat. When I leave there will be no impressions. I will be invisible, no trace of me. I take my seat. I put my arms around my waist. I put my arms around my waist because my stomach is crying.

Slides of the Holocaust on the overhead projector. There is no way of knowing whether the images I am seeing lived or died. Who are the survivors? I am feeling badly for the victims of Auschwitz as is the rest of the class. I am also thinking of four Hey-Dey cookies in my brown recycled lunch bag in the trash. I want to dive through to the bottom,



dive into the thrown out sandwiches, butts, damp paper towels, apple cores and surface with my lunch, a giant pearl that I can stuff inside and swallow and swallow. The lights click back on. The teacher calls out my name first to come get my essay back. I am afraid of the sound of my stomach. Afraid my bones make noise inside my skin as I go up the aisle. Afraid because I envy those people at Auschwitz. But I am most afraid because the inside of my mouth tastes like peanut butter and It Should Not. My desk is two away. My essay is in my hand. I see the "A" on the corner of the page under my name. I see the corner of my desk. Too close and then black.

"You fainted." The school nurse is trying to give me orange juice. I push it away. "Mr. Simms carried you in here like a stack of kindling." "I'm fine." She has pushed the orange juice under my nose again — has no idea that I can't eat again until I go home for dinner. "Have you been feeling ill?" "I'm fine." "Do you have your period?" "I'm fine." "You're very thin. Do you want to get on the scales?"

You can't make me, stupid old bitch. You can't make me eat. This is what I want to tell her but my mouth is drying everything up, swallowing all my words even and nothing is coming out. "Seventy-seven pounds," she says which is better than I thought. "You could die," she tells me. She puts her hands around my waist, puts her hands around my waist. I'm almost there.



## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

STEPHANIE BOLSTER is completing her MFA in Creative Writing at UBC. Her poems, including many from the Alice series, have recently appeared and/or are forthcoming in *The Malahat Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Canada*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Canadian Literature* and *The Antigonish Review*. She won the 1993 Norma Epstein Competition for a selection of Alice poems.

MICHAEL CRUMMEY was born and raised in Newfoundland, and now lives in Kingston, Ontario. He has poems appearing in future issues of *The Malahat Review*, *Quarry*, *Event* and *The Antigonish Review*.

ELIZABETH HAY has written *Crossing the Snow Line* (1989), *The Only Snow in Havana* (1992), and her latest work, *Captivity Tales* was published in 1993 by New Star Books. She now lives in Ottawa.

JOAN MACLEOD, in the few years that she has been writing plays, has already received the Governor General's, Dora Mavor Moore and Chalmers Awards. Her latest work, *Little Sister*, opened recently in Toronto and is scheduled to tour B.C. high schools with Green Thumb Theatre this spring.

NICOLE MARKOTIC is currently working on her PhD at the University of Calgary. She has been published in *West Coast Line*, *Open Letter* and *Prairie Fire*. She has a poetry chapbook out, *Tracking the Game*, and co-publishes the chapbook press, *disOrientation*.

RENEE RODIN has run R2B2 Books and hosted a reading series there since 1986. Though this has given her great pleasure, she would like to spend as much time as possible, in future, bike riding, shooting pool and writing.

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