

THE CAPILANO REVIEW



a poem is a commotion among things — a
search for form — because form is alive — and the poet is, thereby, a
commoter — not a commuter of meaning —

— Robin Blaser

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Robin Blaser / LETTER FROM A STUDENT — LETTER TO A STUDENT

Dear Mr. Blaser:

I am a 4th year English major at X University. A friend and I have elected to present a seminar on you and your poetry to our class. I must confess that I'm having difficulty not only in how to make your poetry accessible to my friends but also in interpreting it myself!

I am reading through Pell Mell at this time and I wonder if you would be able to answer a few questions for me. Before I get to these questions will you please forgive my presumption in writing to you? I just felt that I had to explore all the options in presenting your poems justly.

Mr. Blaser — how would you prefer me to represent you to my classmates?

I noticed that you dedicated a poem to bpNichol; what is the nature of your relationship to his poetry?

Can you tell me what you meant by "alien exotica" and "scientific angelism?"

I noticed various references to art and artists; what role do these play in your writing of poetry?

I am exploring your poem serials; can you tell me what benefits you gain in using this medium instead of other types of poetry?

Would you say that there is a 'concrete' element to your poetry?

May I thank you in advance for simply looking at this letter? A humble student's undying gratitude is yours if you actually respond.

Sincerely,

X

Dear X and friend,

Your letter was forwarded to me by Coach House Press, and I thank you for your generous interest in *Pell Mell*. You offer attention to my work, and attention is fundamental to the way any one of us moves around in the world. I am uneasy with your sense of a necessary "gratitude," but I don't want the courtesy you meant by it to die like a dead letter. That would make me a dead-letter officer. Your exploration of my poems implies a cordiality, and it is that which draws me to respond.

First, you mention "difficulty" and "interpretation."

So first, I answer, "just read" — then try any one poem outloud — you and your friend might read to one another — "difficulty" is one aspect of my reputation that I think is rapidly solved with familiarity —

I suppose syntax is one difficulty — how is so much going on without the "I" of the poem taking imperial power over the flow? — our traditional, learned arrangement of a sentence (syntax) goes something like this: I drive (the) my car — ownership of things all the way — very comfortable — the "I" never at stake in the verb and life of the relation —

the arrangement of my sentences is meant to deny the simplicity and danger of such a relationship as ownership — why, the language isn't yours alone — it's older than you are, and largely other than you are, and it's never transparent to any reality you can think of —

the "I" of my poems is among things, people, etc. (images) — say, "Drive I Car" — there's a fancy word for this — *parataxis* — a placing alongside — or, to put it my way, the "I" of (my) poems is discovered among things, not in charge of them, not owning them, not drowning them in my sentiments —

the "I" then, found among things, is also in great part created by them — whether they be loved, hated, or simply met —

a poem is a commotion among things — a search for form — because form is alive — and the poet is, thereby, a *commoter* — not a commuter of meaning —

(Have you ever read or, for that matter, written a love poem in

which you/I can't see the beloved? — in which one only gets the slop of your/my feeling? — therein, the beloved most often disappears — we have honoured no one — in fact, we've asked the beloved to be drunk up in a disappearance — and the reader is left with your/our washing up)

still, there's an admonition best kept in mind — as Jack Spicer put it, "Learn to use the I before even trying to give it up" — one has, I think, only a brief time to hone the mind, to discover and honour the structures of reason, folding and unfolding as they historically are — only then does one come upon the limits of reason and beautiful clarities — and enter the unfolded of what and where we are —

"Interpretation" — before you, the student, become a critic or a theorist or a philosopher — is perhaps best thought of as what one is saying to one's self as one reads — about what is happening in the poem and about what is happening in one's experience in relation to the poem — and this, when you share it with others, is CONVERSATION — as between you and your friend — as among you and your classmates — there you come upon what you do, indeed, know and feel — and you come upon what you don't know, which is a pleasure of particulars and of finding out studiously — in order to feel and know beyond one's lonely self —

accordingly, one finds out that we're not wandering around looking for a **SELF** that preceded experience, but, rather, we are looking for a world in which to find ourselves — alive and celebrating, sometimes sadly at a loss —

"Interpretation" is not a matter of *a meaning* belonging to an object (the poem) or to somebody else — it's first of all an engagement with — a relation —

have you ever tried to say what music *means*? — not, I hope, without some sense of harmony, disharmony, noise, and counterpoint — voices — of *meaning* —

Language strikes me — rings in my ears — as an instrument by which we converse of our experience in the depths of things, big and little pieces of depths — then, there is, of course, the Language of linguistics and philosophy for your reason to study as an object —

something you are as a person thrown against, while simultaneously you're under it — biologically attached and curious about cosmogony —

How to represent me to your classmates? — well, don't — that would require a photograph — I'm white-headed, approaching 69, no sexual graphic intended — where does that get you? — instead, why not try to open up a relation to a poem — say “poetry is ordinary busyness” — note the child's memory of a barn dance — the beauty of a woman (his mother? he isn't sure) in the tulle dress — wearing a blue pendant — “ pendant blue sparkle” — followed by the laughter of the words the caller uses to guide the steps, as he pounds a broom on the floor to set the rhythm — or try “The Iceberg” — that's about love and human nature that's beneath the surface of what we see — or how about “Image-Nation 20 (the Eve)” — that's about Christmas Eve and families in Canada calling their soldier sons and husbands via CBC in Golan, Baden, and Cypress (it seems there were no women over there that year) — surely conversation could begin with such bits and pieces —

bpNichol — he loved that poem — “the universe is part of ourselves” — so I gave it to him, by name — in my view, he is Canada's #1 poet — top of the heap — I miss him — that youthful going-gone — nevertheless, he left a very great poetry beside you and me, whenever we wish for that refreshment — his wife and daughter, Ellie and Sarah, sent me one of his poems for Christmas this year. I quote it here in case you and your classmates might like to talk about it:

The Natural Thing

I go out at night
when the moon is new
hair grown long and
pockets full of poems.

I carry strange birds on my shoulders
that sing and cry thru the long night,

walk with angels
when the wind is high
wings billowing around me and
long robes flowing.

I am a stranger in the new fields
writing poems from natural things.

I gather
stars, moon, trees and river,
shape them in my hands as
they urge me

till they burst forth
a new, more natural thing.

Your question about “alien exotica” — that occurs in the first poem of the *Pell Mell* series, “Waiting for Hours” — I didn’t mean anything by that — as the poem makes clear, it was said about me — and she who said it is there — she’s wearing a piano shawl with long fringe — “alien” because, I guess, I was born in Denver, Colorado — “exotica” because she took anything she didn’t understand to be exotic, foreign, an unlikeness loaded with the disparaging — she’s devoted to sameness as in insiderdom, which defines outsiderdom — her hatred is/was rather silly, but fun for me — I won’t tell you her name because I am carefully forgetting it —

You ask about “scientific angelism” — which turns up more than once in my poems and in my essays, always in italics to indicate that it isn’t just mine — it is brilliantly applied in René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, where I found it — to describe a certain brand of science which believes it can explain everything, thus becoming systematic power rather than science within the human, intellectual effort — and this is NOT the greatness of science, but, rather, an arrangement of knowledge — a kind of desire, like syntax — that becomes totalitarian, positivistic, deterministic, an ism or many isms — and never admits to the conspiracy to own reality, yours, mine, everybody’s — it is philosophically and poetically impoverished — now, using that popular metaphor accountants have given us, consider carefully their “bottom line” — human nature is indeterminate — awesomely and dangerously so — and creative — there is another world of science, which belongs to your honed intelligence — that we work to know — take, for example, Canada’s own Nobel Prizer, John Charles Polanyi — his fine public statements — which may, indeed, inherit and reflect his father’s views on those “irreducible entities” we call persons — there are angels of the mind very different from those isms — angels are, shall we say, okay —

Concerning “art and artists” in my work — where else would one learn about art except from them and among them? They are particulars — like bread and butter and earthworms — of my heart and thought — so, I honour them as best I can —

You ask about “serial poems” — this is a way to keep the form open — *open form* — never a closure in or of being among things — a continuous song — *a fold which unfolds the unfolded* — perhaps, you could think of modes in music, wherein the major and minor scales are unfound, disturbed, lost, or distrusted — take a look at “Image-Nation 18 (an apple,” wherein “Love is Form” and ethos — if my poems say anything that is larger than any one of the poems can say singly, the serial structure — 1 to infinity — allows me to say that human nature — mine in the midst of things — is INDETERMINATE, *an adventure, an open narrative — continuing —*

There are no “types” of poetry — that is, if we’re talking about our experience of any given poem — typology is interesting for classifying things and for generalizations—where that would get you, I have no idea, except one mountain becomes all mountains and one sea becomes all seas—there are, however, formalities of poetry — *form* is a lovely word, coming to us out of Latin — the trouble is that we’ve lost our sense of the life of it — its rhythm, another lovely word, coming to us out of Greek — *rhythmos* — we too often take the word *form* to mean *shape*, a spatial sense of it — as of an object, a circle, a square, or a blob (exactly what some poems are, especially when the “I” of the poet sits in tons on top of the thing) — but-but-but form is alive, a structure in words — *form is no more than an extension of content*, and that’s a lot — is your content alive? — your language operational — not stamped into a shape in a General Motors Plant —

Please note that open form is a discovery of twentieth-century art and thought (philosophy and science included) — so you will find artists, composers, philosophers, and scientists swimming around in the waves of my work — I try to honour them —

Would I say that “there’s a ‘concrete’ element to my poetry?” you ask — there’s the concrete of the particulars — there’s the concrete of the language, which allows me some relation to and respect from certain of the Language Poets — in fact, I wish to be joined with those poets who are overwhelmingly aware of the *materiality* of language—that it’s not transparent to tradition, to reality, to pie-in-the-sky — this has a great deal to do with our contemporary condition —

our contemporary belief — the WORD was not spoken once and forever (for me, Mallarmé is a guide in this) — syntax, our arrangement of words towards a meaning is disturbed — the TRUTH, in poetic or philosophical terms, may be one somewhere, but, as Kafka said, it has many faces—changing into mortality — where the dance begins —

You did not ask about my “notorious erudition” — Heavens to Betsy! I’m grateful for that — that’s a pretentious way of describing another concrete aspect of my work — the record of a search and an adventure — in books and languages — in the delight of what is other and way beyond what I am, who am as little, wispy, and whispering as everybody else —

So, think over what you mean by the word “concrete” — basically, the word means something solid — how solid is language and the experience of it? — materiality, like spirituality, is not exactly solid — I think I’ll go for the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead’s sense of a *process of concretion* — that takes the “concrete” beyond my stolidity into the happenings among things — *the side walks* —

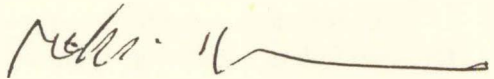
I’d like also to ask you to remember that there is no quarrel between “popular” art and “high” art, so called — that’s cultural anxiety about commercialism, which currently controls form — mixed up with North American anti-intellectuality — the God-given, as if creation were not at work — both high and popular (which face to face imply something lower than) are conditions — situations — of thought and feeling you may enter or not, according to your energy — they exist together and entwine, so to speak, like briars wrapped around whatever “we” are — they’s rhythm — rhythm — rhythm — writing, talking, singing, painting, sculpting—on and on, an entanglement — my favourite example of which is an evening with the Chronos Quartet playing the most demanding of contemporary music — and offering in encores — full Quartet style — Jimi Hendrix’s wonderful “Purple Haze” and “Foxy Lady” — that’s rhythm — of intelligence — of form — and the youths there hummed along — swaying the auditorium —

Hey! you two — students should not be humble — I hope that's not the new style — attention is good enough, for therein begins scholarship in the best sense —

and friendship, which is guidance in every attention, is good enough — to take you somewhere —

Oh! and ask your classmates to look out for the fun and laughter in *Pell Mell* — seriousness is ruined without laughter's companionship —

Yours in Whatever,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Pell Mell", followed by a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line that extends to the right.

Elizabeth Haynes / SYNAPSING

DIARY OF BARBARA EVELYN DECHESNAY

October something

The next door neighbour mows his lawn. The CBC Vancouver Orchestra plays something Wagnerish — George would know it. He sleeps.

How am I feeling? Here's a thunderous part — clash of drums, cymbals, the heavens falling in.

That about describes it.

October 3

Fed George dinner — the modified soft. He refused to eat the carrots, took a mouthful and spat them back onto his plate.

"Bady."

"I know it looks like baby food, just have another spoonful."

"Badyshit!"

"Listen, I'll talk to Dr. Fitzsimmons about it, but for now we . . ."

"Pit-pa, no Fit-pi, no Pit-pi, shit!"

"Something about the doctor, dear?"

"Yes, Fit . . ."

"Fitzsimmons, dear."

"Shit."

"It's not about the doctor?"

"Doc . . ."

"You're feeling sick?"

"No!"

"Do you want me to keep trying?"

"NO!"

I tape record and transcribe our conversations. For Mona, the

speech therapist. So she can see how we communicate in the “home environment.” Should I put in how carrot dribbles from the corner of his mouth, how his lips twist up when he tries to talk, how I hold my breath? Waiting.

We used to play a tongue twister game when the girls were young: howmuchwoodcouldawoodchuckchuckchuckifawoodchuckcouldchuck If a wood chuck could chuck . . .

George always won.

P.M.

Did the speech therapy homework — I write the words and he copies them and then I say each one and he says it after me. He wouldn’t watch my mouth today, kept trying to say the same word over and over again — “Es-se Es-be Et-me nononodamnhell.” The swear words come out perfectly. I said we’d try Esme later.

But I forgot. Then we went to bed.

October 4

To therapy today: OT, Rec therapy — the RT seemed put out because he didn’t want to make a wallet, the leather kind stitched up the side with horses’ heads on the front. I told her he’s never liked those kind of wallets, always thought they were gauche. She said that was the activity for today. I said then he won’t participate today.

He got a new physio. She took his cane away and made him walk, up and down, up and down the gym. At the end, he was totally exhausted, tried to say “bye,” tried to make his lips push “b.” By the time he got it out, she was on to the next patient.

October 6

Went to see Dr. F while George was in OT. I had to wait; there was a long line of us stretching down the corridor and out the waiting room door. “Calgary General Hospital,” said the brass sign on the green wall. “In the business of caring since 1890.” The man beside me was falling out of his wheelchair. He said thank you when I straightened him. Kept saying “thank you, thank you, thank you.” It’s called perseverance.

Dr. F. has a brass sign on his door: Dr. William R. Fitzpatrick, M.D.

F.R.C.P. He told me to sit down. He opened a file. I read *DeCesnay, Geo (C.V.A.): 57 yr old male, University Music Professor, no prev Hx arteriosclerosis, admitted 7/30 with . . .* He saw me and closed it. Confidential. Not for the spouse.

While he talked, I stared at the print above his head — a bamboo tree beside a raging river.

He said to try George on solids. He said his upper and lower extremities show some improvement.

I said George used to play eight instruments proficiently, one — the violin — magnificently.

He said there is not much change in George's speech.

I said he can say parts of some words like *Ba* for *Barb* and the girls' names, *Es* for *Esme* and *Gin* for *Guin*, and important words, short words, like *eat* and *go*. Some "automatic" phrases, too, like *thank you* and *OK*.

"Yes," he said, "but the aphasia is still significant. And it's been three months since the infarct."

"Two and a half," I said. "And he has apraxia, *verbal apraxia*, Dr. Fitzsimmons. It's a motor speech problem."

"*Fitzpatrick*," he corrected. "And your husband, Mrs. deChesnay, also has aphasia, a language problem. The two normally go together, you see."

7th

I called Mona while George was sleeping today and asked her about the aphasia — "impairment or loss of the faculty of using or understanding spoken or written language," according to my *Random House College Dictionary*. Because of his apraxia it's hard to tell exactly how impaired his language skills are, she said. "His auditory comprehension for functional material seems fairly intact," she said.

We are listening to Sir Colin Davis and the Philharmonia Orchestra playing a little night music (filed, by George, under MS — M for Mozart and S for Serenade in G Major). He is wearing a cream turtle-neck and his beige Harris tweed suit with the leather patches at the elbows. He's smoking — something French by the smell of it. He smiles. Thinking? Remembering that summer we spent in Nice,

playing Beethoven's *Sonata #7 in D Minor* for me on the roof, under a sea of stars?

This allegro bit is his favorite section — duDUdu duDUdu the horns proclaim.

"hmHMhm hmHMhm," hums George.

I am thinking of having a luncheon. A small one, with the girls, perhaps Marj and Andrew if he promises not to mention the quartet and she promises not to run on too much. We'll have salmon en croute, a lettuce and endive salad, perhaps a chocolate mousse. We'll listen to some Vivaldi, drink tea in the front room under an Indian summer sun.

"duDUdu duDUdu," sings George.

How do I feel? He seems almost normal. I feel almost happy.

Still October

Breakfast tick physio exercises tock nap tick lunch tock speech exercises tick news tock supper tick

Tempus fugit.

Guin says I need some time alone; he can go to his therapy by himself on the handibus. I said, "Is that what they teach you to say in Social Work school?"

I made her cry.

Wanted to say, "Sorry, it wasn't me." Wanted to. Couldn't.

I don't think he'll go on the handibus. He's too proud. Much much too proud. They can tell that, I think, his therapists. They are very respectful. His OT says he's refined; she loves his silk shirts and "those scarves." "They're called cravats dear," I corrected her.

I told George later. He laughed and laughed. He couldn't stop. They call it lability.

next (week?)

George sleeps. My writing time. Sometimes when I'm writing, I catch George looking at me suspiciously. He makes excuses, then, to call me, to find his speech book, to make him a cup of tea, to draw him a bath.

We called Esme last night — George's idea.

This morning I wrote down some more words for him to try to

copy but didn't have time to say them with him because I had to go shopping. I hate to leave him but there wasn't a bone in the house (not even for the dog). So I copied down *Esme, Guin* (*Guineviere* is too hard, says Mona). He pointed to me and managed Ba so I wrote down *Barb*, too. Then I came up with a few more useful words (*eat, bath, walk, tea*) and left him. When I came back, he was bent over the paper, his hair standing up electric the way it did when he used to sit at the piano trying to get a passage right and he was singing. Singing "Es-me, Es-me, Es-me" — the emphasis on the "*me*" but he got it. "That's it," I cried because it was his first time. "You got all the sounds," I shouted, hugging and hugging his electric head.

The mind synapsing.

October 10

These days I've been preoccupied with the coming winter. I hate to drive in the snow but whenever I mention the handibus George scowls and says "nonoshit." Not even if you miss your session with that Irish Mona, I joke, pretty her mouth and green her eyes. He smiles, remembering the Salinger story? He read it to me once. Upon a time.

Aphasia. Absence of speech. Out of phase. Out of time.

Esme called yesterday, wants to sell all her possessions, move to Mexico and study Spanish. "A rolling stone gathers no moss," I said to George. He frowned, shrugged. I can just hear Dr. F.: "It's the receptive aphasia, difficulty understanding verbal abstractions."

On Sunday the girls came over. Guin sat on George's lap, fixed him cups of tea which he sipped, two-handed clumsy, liquid dripping down his chin. She read him passages from a book called *Peace, Love and Healing*. Esme played some Puccini on her tuba.

Es wanted him to play. I had to drag her into the kitchen, tell her about limb apraxia, how he can't do things with his hands volitionally, voluntarily, on purpose, so don't, don't you dare ask him to play!

"I didn't know," she said, lip trembling.

All afternoon his eyes followed the girls. He smiled, nodded, didn't try to talk.

Someone looking in our window would never know.

October ?

The song *Feelings* has been running through my head all day.

George used to say pop music was facile. "Imagine people listening to drivel like that," he'd say, "when there's Mozart, Beethoven, Dvorak, Chopin, Bach, Liszt, Mendelsohn, Mussorgsky, Wagner, Handel, Shostakovich, Rimsky-Korsakov . . ." The names slipping off his tongue.

Now he is trying to fix the catch on the screen door; it's been banging in the night, waking him up. He's clumsy, drops the screw-driver. "Damnshit," he says, "godamnhell."

9:00

I've been thinking tonight. About speech. Or, rather, notspeech. That stall of nerve, myelin sheath, synapse, misfiring or not firing at all. Those voluptuous elegant words: procencephalon, mesencephalon, dienchephalon, rhinecephalon — forebrain, mid brain, hind brain,

that old animal reptilian brain.

The tape recorder was on.

He was trying to tell me something.

"Ba?"

"Yes?"

"Ah-sho no fo no . . ."

"Do you want to watch T.V.?"

"No, uh, sot no sof."

"Sofa, something about the sofa?"

"Nono-fo . . . damnshit."

"Fo, fo? Phone, do you want to phone someone?"

"Fo!"

"Fo? Folk, folk music? Do you want to listen to some folk music?"

"FO!"

"OK dear, I'm trying."

"SO FO damnshit!"

"I'm trying, fofo, fold something? The laundry? Your shirts?"

"Shit."

"Show me."

"SHIT."

"I don't know. What? Can you write it?"

"FOFOFO!"

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU WANT!"

He pushed me.

~~Bastard.~~

October 12

There. I stroked it out.

Were an embolism so easily erased.

Yet I do feel better. I am sitting on the love seat with a glass of Bristol cream sherry, remembering how George and I listened to music on Sunday afternoons: the dog — was it Johanne then? — asleep on George's feet, the morning paper discussed and discarded, the girls reading in their rooms, Brandenburg Concertos crashing the hours away.

And now?

Now I will draw the curtains and turn down the heat. I will pour myself another sherry and put on a little music — something quiet so I don't wake him. I will wrap the afghan around my feet. I will empty this monkey mind.

Oct 13

It's an off day (non-therapy). George is listening to *Water Music*. I sit at the kitchen table, watching black storm clouds trudge towards me. Amazing, the sky was so blue this morning. I tiptoed out, left George sleeping, felt guilty — no me to answer his BA, BA. I left a note. He can read at the simple sentence level, says Mona. The note said simply:

"Gone to the P.O.

Back toute de suite."

(She didn't say if he could still read French.)

Clouds ran off across a cerulean sky.

Midnight

As I write this I watch my pen move across the page, the words running easy, cortex nerve muscle nerve cortex, circling without thought — recording, inventing, making a world.

Tonight he didn't know where to start writing on the page. A new clean white page. Started at the bottom and wrote off the side, couldn't get his hands to do what he wanted. They gestured wildly, dangled awkwardly out in space like drying on a line.

"□" for E, "⊖" for B.

"No it's backwards do you see, and the E is one line down three across. Now connect them watch me," I said.

But he can't. Connect. He's condemned to roll that stone of language — confused conglomerate of letters and sounds — up the mountain.

Marj said "Why don't you get him an ABC book?"

"Because he is not a child."

Sometimes.

P.M.

Dark already. What happened to daylight savings?

Words without thought. Thought without words. If the words don't come, are they there? Mona says yes. If we don't think in words, how do we think? If there are no words, what makes memory? "Such a solemn procession of notes," George used to say of the *Concerto Grosso Number 12 in D Minor*, one of his favorites. Such a solemn procession of words. Buddhists talk of emptying the mind. How when there are always words inside to analyze, explain, cajole, exhort, berate?

Does he hear the world in sounds — *forte, pianissimo, allegro guisto, andante con lamento, poco a poco?*

At first he'd cover his ears, everything too loud suddenly, the world giant cymbals crashing in.

Outside a wind mourns, branches hammer at the window to get in, mad dendrites fading into black.

Does he see the world in images?

October 14 (around midnight)

Today we listened to Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. George was in his usual place, the old leather armchair in the corner. His eyes were closed. His fingers thrummed the table beside the whiskey decanter, a glass, some music journals. The window above me was open a little, letting in a wind that rattled the last of the leaves against

the eaves — cold but George keeps the heat so high. I was in my usual place on the settee, diary in hand. Waiting. Waiting for George to say “What are you writing?” “Maybe we should give Esme a call, see how that tuba piece is coming?” “There’s a French baroque chamber ensemble playing next week.”

His fingers tap tap *andante angelic* on the table. Tap tap, rattle of leaves, tap tap to his favorite, *La Cabane de Baba-Yaga sur des Pattes de Poule*. Remember, George, how Guin used to have those dreams, about Baba Yaga, the house-woman in that book you bought, pictures all garish blacks and reds, you remember? Esme loved it, though, didn’t she? Then the pomp of *La Grande Porte de Kiev* and . . .

“Ba?”

“Yes?”

“Co, uh, cose.”

“You’re cold?”

“No, toes.”

“Your feet are cold?”

“Cozh!”

“You want some more clothes?”

“CosecoseCOSE.”

“I don’t know. Can you tell me another word?”

“Door, no. Widow.”

And I got up, my old bones pulling me to earth, and shut the window.

Oct 15

Didn’t stay for therapy today. I had to shop for the luncheon.

I’m listening to the *Rites of Spring*. A young girl dances herself to death, sacrificed to the Gods of spring.

Stravinsky dreamed it.

dumdumdumdumdumdumdum

To appease the Gods. What Gods? And why — what life to appease? A young girl’s? An old man’s? Why? Still life there, still so much he had to do. The quartet was good, was getting recognized. He was looking forward to retiring in a few more years, thought he might get a chance to be Head of the Department, Acting Head anyway. He would make some changes, offer more first year music appreciation

courses: "The kids in music are already converted, we have to reach the others. So many lost, wild kids, out of control. They need to learn to love."

If music be the food of love . . .

dumdum dumdum

play on.

A girl dances, whirls out of control. A young girl, an old man. Not old, dammit — 57, prime of life. I encouraged exercise. We walked, camped, biked. I cooked low cholesterol meals. He wasn't overweight, he didn't have high blood pressure

I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT

I DID EVERY DAMN THING RIGHT

just one of those things

a bit of the heart shoots off

Oct 16

Today, it is. The luncheon. The salmon is in the oven, the chocolate mousse is chilling in the fridge. I'll make the salad at the last, chopchop the endive, tear the leaves small, so he can manage them. He comes in, frowns — at my writing? — asks:

"What time?"

Asks:

"Who?"

Practises:

"Es-me, Gin, Marg and An-dew."

Says:

"Four. OK Four. OK Four."

He's changed his clothes twice. Decided on the brown tweed with a pink silk shirt and brown cravat.

"He-llo An-dew, no, An-dew, shit, An-drrew, Hello Es-be, Es-te, damn!" I know I should go and help him. Yes, I will, I'll put this away, in a minute. "He-llo, he-llo, how are you? Find, fine, fine. Fiiiine. IIII'm fiiiine, Gin, Guu-in, Es-me."

Now he's humming something familiar, yes, I remember

*Sweetest little Barbie
Everybody knows
Don't know what to call her but she's
mighty like a rose . . .*

Don't cry, for God's sake, it's only a song. They'll be here any minute. Put this damn thing away.

4:30 P.M.

He watched at the window, had the door open even before Marj and Andrew got out of their car. He cleared his throat, took Marj's hand, kissed it, said "He-llo Marj." He shook Andrew's hand gravely, shaking and shaking, "He-llo An-dew, An-drrew. How are you?" And they both said, "Hello, hello, George, so good to see you, you're looking so well."

Marj chattered on and on as usual. "He looks wonderful, you wouldn't even know." I quickly whisked her off into the kitchen, before she could ask him to play, leaving Andrew and George alone in the study.

The girls arrived together — Esme with her tuba and Guin with two books about people who recovered from strokes. George sat at the head of the table and smiled and nodded and said, "pass mik" and "thank you" and "good." He pushed the salmon deliberately onto the fork with his knife, slowly lifted shaking fork to mouth like a little child, so careful not to spill.

Then we listened to Esme play a piece I didn't know and after a little, Andrew joined her on the piano. The piece was sad and haunting, the deep bass notes of the tuba wrapping around themselves, the piano pulling them out, sending them up.

We all clapped. George was the last to stop.

And now they're gone and George is sleeping.

The sky's a deep purple, lights are coming on. A chinook blows around the yard. Leaves whisper to the eaves. The CBC Vancouver Orchestra is playing something gentle: "Ten tender flutes and the violins trembling pianissimo," says the announcer. I open the window, rest my elbows on the sill and breathe dirt, dry leaves, perhaps a

flower, stirring bulbous and ancient under the soil.

A hand on my shoulder. I turn and there's George in his blue velvet dressing gown, one side of his face flushed and crinkled from the pillow, the other cold and white.

"It went well," I say.

And "right" — write? — is his reply.

Gayla Reid / MOIRA

Susanna held Moira's hand at parties and introduced her, saying, "I want you to meet Moira. Moira is taking the Church of Rome apart brick by brick."

(This was in New Haven, in the Sixties. Moira was doing her doctorate; she was writing her thesis on Auden.)

Moira, hearing Susanna's introduction, would see in her mind the bricks of the convent school she had attended back home and the bricks of the big cathedral beside it. Together, the convent and cathedral took up an entire town block.

And Moira would be daunted by the task ahead.

While building the cathedral tower a man had fallen to his death. He had gone straight to heaven, the nuns said, because his work was an act of faith.



When I became part of Moira's care team I signed up for early mornings.

Early mornings are her best time, Inez says.

We sit in the garden, in the sunshine. The garden is at the back of her home in North Sydney, the home she shares with her lover, Inez.

Moira has her cushions, she has her hat. I bring her pills, something to drink.

We have three garden chairs: one for her, one for me, and one for her massive tabby tomcat Mad Max.

Moira needs her pain killers every four hours. But at the top of that time, in hours one and two, she's relaxed.

The Cootamundra wattle is out, a nervy gold-and-black shivering behind the garage.

"Good job we're not allergic," Moira says. "You and me."

She touches my arm.

There's something perhaps I should mention: If I become aware of myself, standing in the supermarket in front of the grapefruit, let's say, I am puzzled to find myself there.

I am picking out fruit, and I know this must be part of a plan: put the grapefruit into the bag, take them to the check-out, carry them home. Eat them.

So that when Moira touches me, I am taken by surprise.

When my mother was in hospital, I was in Sydney and she was in Adelaide. I could not get away.

My son was an infant in my arms.

I did go down to see mum, but only twice. "Couldn't take the time, I see," Mum said. "Too busy with your own concerns."

I don't know what pain killers they gave them then, but whatever they were, they weren't enough.

Moira's my boss. Was my boss. We teach English at the TAFE, the College of Technical and Further Education; she's the department head.

It's not as though I knew her well. We were work friends.

Just after the diagnosis, she was still feeling quite well, still coming in to work, cracking jokes, chairing meetings.

She asked me herself if I wanted to be part of her care team, when the time came.

"You do wonder," she said, "what's going to happen next."

We sit in the garden and Moira tells me stories. How she went back to the town where she grew up and found that the school had been closed down.

"The bricks were all still there but the nuns had gone," Moira says.

In her garden the red-whiskered bul-buls are singing. We listen to their jaunty, falling whistle.

She'd lost touch with Susanna.

The last time Moira saw Susanna, Susanna was living in upstate New York with a woman who had three full-sized poodles. This

woman, who was a therapist in demand, left the housework and the dogs to Susanna.

"I always knew she'd made a mess of things," Moira says.

I imagine Susanna. She is being hustled across a park by large excited dogs. She has their leashes in a tangle.

"Susanna was the love of my life," Moira adds. "It was quite a long time ago."

They were both teaching assistants, Moira and Susanna. That was how they met.

"I was just terrible," Moira says. "I'd have the students sit round in a circle and I'd stare at them and ask, What do you think the poet means when he says, *We must love one another or die*?"

Those of us who are on Moira's care team had an initial meeting at her house. Convened by Inez. The front room was crowded — about twenty people. Women, mostly. The neighbours from both sides: the Chowdhrys and old Mrs. Morrison.

Moira was there, in the best chair. And Inez, of course, bossing us around: sit here, sit there, bring another chair from the kitchen.

Inez has that frizzy hair that sticks out all round.

I know what slot I fall into: From the TAFE. Straight.

Inez made us have a round of sorts, to say who we were and why we thought we wanted to do this.

"It will take a lot of emotional energy," Inez said. "It's a big commitment."

As if we didn't know that.

I explained about my mother.

Mrs. Chowdhry said, in an emphatic, clear voice: "We want to help because it's Moira." Mr. Chowdhry and the two embarrassed big sons nodded.

Mrs. Morrison said, simply, "We love you, Moira."

Inez looked a bit pissed off at that. As if she wanted dibs on all of the loving herself.

It is in fiction that I meet women I understand. They are floating on the ceiling or drifting about the sky while the weather passes

through them.

In the real world, however, things are not like this. There is talk instead of self-esteem, high and low.

A crowd scene in a sauna: some of the women have thighs that make a tiny sucking sound as they get up from the bench and run, with gleaming breasts, into the cold showers. Those are the ones who have high self-esteem.

Long before she met Susanna, when she was a young woman of twenty-two, Moira was engaged.

At that time Moira worked in the library in Armidale, in northern New South Wales. The library had been built in honour of those who had been killed in World War II.

Each work-day morning Moira left her flat and rode her bike down the hill to work. She picked up the books that had tumbled through the after-hours slot. Then she turned a page in the book of remembrance. The book sat in the foyer on a little podium, inside a glass case.

Once in a while she would turn to the page that had her father's name on it.

Captain John Halverson, Tarakan, 1945.

"Where the hell is Tarakan?" I ask Inez.

"Telling you that story, is she?" says Inez.

Someone from the night shift has left cheese on a plate by the sink, attracting a multitude of small brown ants.

Inez runs the tap and washes the ants down.

Now I know for a fact that Moira would never do a thing like that. When ants walked all over the sink at work Moira would knock her knuckles on the counter, address them: "Come along chaps. Time, gentlemen, time."

She'd wait until the ants had hurried off through their crack in the tiles.

"What sort of a night did she have?" I ask Inez.

"Not so good," Inez says.

Moira and Inez have been together for nine years. They'd been

going to break up, before the diagnosis. Then they re-negotiated.

"She has someone else," Moira says.

Moira pulls her hat down over her face.

"You do know that, don't you?" Moira adds.

I live with my son. I haven't had anyone since — as my own mother would have put it — Bully was a pup.

I am one of those women couples speculate about.

What does she do?

Probably perfectly happy on her own.

Probably.

Moira tells me about her mother. Moira's mother fell in love with a Methodist, a shocking thing.

Her parents disapproved. They beseeched, they prayed.

His parents went one better — disowned him completely.

They were married, Moira's mother and the disowned Methodist, in the Catholic church registry. No nuptial mass, no nuptial blessing, no flowers, no wedding music.

"In hugger-mugger," Moira says. "Such a begrudged, half-hearted ceremony."

But in the snaps of the wedding her mother and father look — despite his uniform and her street clothes — ecstatic, triumphant. (This in an era when, in the face of the wedding photographer, restraint was customary.)

Moira sent me into her study to find the album for her. She showed me these pictures, proof.

After her father was killed by a sniper at Tarakan in Borneo, Moira tells me, her mother gave up.

"She signed off," Moira says.

Her mother took a job cooking and cleaning at the local Catholic boys' school where her brother was a Brother.

"There was no need for her to bury herself like that," says Moira.

"You mustn't do that," she adds. "You mustn't give up."

Moira's theory: Her mother, having had a brief period of defiant physical love, felt deeply punished, rebuked, by her husband's death.

Moira's mother went daily to mass in the boys' school chapel. It had a side alcove built especially for the maids. The alcove faced the altar at right angles, so that the boys couldn't see them, the women.

"She had my father's picture on the dressing table," Moira says. "In his army uniform. With his hat band riding on his chin."

Having said that, Moira, without warning, begins to weep.

It happens. She'll be going along, telling me her stories, doing fine, and then it's as if she has stepped on a trap-door, fallen through.

At such times, I take her hand. "Moira," I say, "Moira. It's all right, Moira." Although it isn't.

Young Moira rode her bike to St. Angela's, away on the other side of town.

Her mother's piety was well-known to the nuns, and her father's unfortunate religion had been cancelled out by the happy certainty of his death. Moira had no difficulty getting someone to walk beside her when they were being marched in a crocodile over to the cathedral, which was often.

But in high school Moira developed a crush on the baddest of the Bad Girls.

Bad Girls came from Sydney. They were sent away to the country, to boarding school, to get straightened out.

This Bad Girl had hung around milk bars with bodgies, gone for rides on their motor bikes. She wore a medallion around her neck, not of the Virgin Mary but of James Dean. She chewed gum and giggled during the rosary.

Sometimes Bad Girl stood by the coal shed, waiting for Moira. They would go inside and smooch. "Or whatever we called it then," Moira says.

"I got less daring as time went on," she says.

"But I shouldn't be talking all the time," Moira says. "Tell me about yourself."

Of course, there is Martin.

My son, Martin, is eighteen.

Martin sits in his room and listens to jazz on winter Sunday afternoons. The fog rolls in from the ocean and you admit that, for you, it's

not likely to ever happen again — the passion, the overwhelming happiness.

“An eighteen-year old shouldn’t be tuned in to that,” I tell Moira.

“Maybe he doesn’t hear what you do,” she says. “Maybe he hears something quite different.”

“What about lovers?” Moira asks.

I was afraid she would.

The palliative care nurses come.

One of them talks non-stop about pain management, then says, “My husband has lupus. Unfortunately.”

Another dips her head and blushes at the posters on the bedroom wall.

The third smiles too much. “What do you bet she takes a swig of that liquid morphine before she comes in,” Moira says.

They keep a logbook about what they call TLCs.

“Doesn’t it just make you want to throw up?” Moira says.

Moira, an undergraduate at university, went to the Newman Society barbecue and got herself a boyfriend.

Charred chops, endless beer, and dreadful drinking songs.

She sings them for me, bits she can remember: “Oh I do want to be a Roman Catholic/Oh I do want to join the Church of Rome/Oh I do want to be a lacky of the priests/And get as drunk as blazes on the major feasts.”

She’s really getting into this when Inez comes striding across the lawn, to say bye bye, she’s off to work.

Inez is often jumping into her car and driving away. Inez is a lawyer; she specializes in international law. She has a new lover, in Germany. They get together when Inez is in Brussels or at the Hague.

“Her name is Inge,” Moira tells me.

“Inez and Inge,” I say.

It sounds like a porn movie, but I don’t say that. I suppose it’s none of my business, even though she’s talking to me about it.

We both watch the car pull out of the driveway; a quick toot of the horn, and off down the street.

I tell Moira what I read in the papers.

They did this survey about being in love. Ten per cent said they had never been in love. Ten per cent said they had been in love but had found it too painful.

Moira lies back on the cushions and I brush her hair. Her hair is thick, salt-and-black pepper. Irish hair.

I look down at her face, at the lines around her eyes.

She's losing a lot of weight and her body is smaller, more bony.

The doctors are cagey.

She could go on for years, they say. You never know.

The others in the care team will have to go back to their work, their families, their own lives.

I will stay on, combing Moira's hair in the garden.

"Love is so terribly important," I tell Martin. "All kinds. You have to be willing to take risks, to go for it."

Martin looks at me, briefly wary.

"If you don't you'll regret it later," I say.

Martin is sitting at the breakfast table, eating. His silky young skin stretches over growing bones; daily, he is more fresh, more handsome, more like his father must have been at his age.

"Does she look any different, Mum?" Martin asks.

"No, love," I say. To reassure.

But Moira makes terrible, out-of-fashion jokes. "Eat your heart out, Bobby Sands," she says.

This is how it will be: I am strolling on a beach with her.

We have walked down through the tough, delicate bush, moving quietly, aware of small eyes taking note.

Her arm is in mine because she is still weak. What a break, she says — leaning on me — what luck, what a bonus, what a marvellous encore.

Inez will be off on one of her trips.

So Moira had this boyfriend named Michael. The son of a doctor. Who sat beside her on the bus during Newman Society outings. Kissed

her, she claims, during the singing of *Michael, Row the Boat Ashore*.

"All very wet," Moira says.

He wanted to marry her, did Michael.

I'll take him home to my mother, decided Moira. And that will be that.

Her mother, slouching around with the other school maids on Sunday afternoons. Her mother, in her wool socks, drinking tea and looking at magazines.

For afternoon tea, her mother made up some pink icing and stuck it between wholemeal biscuits.

On the washing line, the maids' underwear flapped, large and dangerous and far too real.

They sat on packing cases in the sun and studied the floor plans in *House and Gardens*. "Look at this," her mother said, "it isn't fair. Master bedroom, master bedroom. Why should the son always get the biggest room?"

But that wasn't that. The doctor's son went ahead and bought the engagement ring anyway.

Moira wore it to her part-time job in the library.

The Anglican bishop, who had come in for his weekly supply of westerns, admired it.

Moira, in a wide Fifties skirt and twin-set with a Peter Pan collar, holding out her engagement ring finger to the bishop.

"Three guesses what I did," Moira says.

"Don't need them," I say, pleased with myself.

He was a lecturer at the university, from England.

He came to the library and sat in the periodicals section and stared at Moira when she took the books off the trolley and reached up to put them in the shelves.

It was a seduction based entirely on words, says Moira. She sends me into her study in search of the book, claims to be able to find the exact passage.

"Here it is," she says, and reads: " . . . she received the maximum of unspeakable communication in touch, dark, subtle, positively silent,

a magnificent gift and give again, a perfect acceptance and yielding, a mystery, the reality of that which can never be known, vital, sensual reality that can never be transmuted into mind content, but remains outside, living body of darkness and silence and subtlety, the mystic body of reality. She had her desire fulfilled.' "

Moira laughs. She re-reads the last sentence.

I don't know if I should laugh or not.

I don't feel like laughing.

I reach right back and tell Moira about Martin's father, how he left me when I began to show with Martin.

"Perhaps he was the love of my life," I say.

I tell her about another man, from, well, quite a few years ago.

His interminable marriage.

Inez is furious. She paces up and down the kitchen and cannot calm down.

"Who the fuck helped themselves to Moira's tarts?" she yells.

Someone on the night shift has eaten them.

Jam tarts are the only food that attracts Moira these days. (Mostly she just drinks Sustagen; she has trouble keeping things down.)

Inez buys these tarts in a cakeshop in the Strand Arcade. She calls them linzer torte.

"What creature would do a thing like that?" demands Inez. "This bloody well takes the cake," she says, unaware.

Moira, in the living room on cushions, laughs. Rings her bell.

Someone on the team has given her a little brass bell so that she can let us know if she needs us, if we happen to be out of the room.

"Did some knave stole those tarts all away?" Moira asks. (She's in good form this morning.)

Inez bursts into tears.

"Come here, my little jam tart," Moira says to Inez.

Inez puts her face into Moira's neck and they murmur together.

Inez begins to lick Moira's ear.

We've finished with the doctor's son and the university lecturer. At last, we are up to Susanna.

But before she can tell me all about Susanna, Moira has a setback.
I arrive for my morning shift and Inez stands in the doorway, her arms hanging down, hands slack.

Last night Moira was in a sort of coma.

"We thought this might be it," Inez says.

Moira isn't the same after that.

Her energy is down; she doesn't want to go out into the garden in the morning any more.

Instead of talking with Moira, I do the washing.

Moira now has prodigious night sweats. The sheets and her nightgown have to be changed three or four times each night.

When I go in and out of her room, Moira smiles at me but in an unfocussed, polite way.

As if I were some stranger.

One morning I go in to see her and she gestures to me to come close. (Inez is in the living room, talking on the phone.) Moira reaches up and takes both my hands.

"I want you to do something for me," she whispers. "I need you to get in touch with Susanna."

She lies back on the cushions. Forces herself to go on.

"Tell Susanna I have to see her," she urges. "Find her. Make her come."

I wait until Inez goes out to work so I can search through Moira's study for her old address books. Eventually I find Susanna's name, and a bunch of crossed-out addresses.

I take all the address books home and carry them into the house as if they were fragile, contraband.

I dial the numbers, overseas, to the States, to Canada.

People with strange accents come on the line and can't understand what I'm saying.

I have to repeat myself.

You must have the wrong number.

No, sorry.

Lady, are you a nut or what? Like I told you before. She ain't here, period.

After work, I go into the city to the GPO and look in all the phone books. I call the library and talk to the reference librarian.

I call information for the major cities on the northeast coast of the United States, of Canada. Then I call the numbers.

I make a list of the names of these cities. There are 287 cities on my list.

Piece by piece by piece, I am going to solve this puzzle. I am going to find Susanna.

I will find Susanna for you.

I will bring her to you.

I whisper into the bathroom mirror, making it fog over.

One day there is a new roster on the refrigerator and my name isn't on it. There must be some mistake.

Right away I go into the bedroom, but Moira is curled up under the quilt, asleep. In the crook of her legs, Mad Max is licking his bum.

So I ask the woman who's going off shift. Like me, she's from the TAFE; straight. I know her quite well.

She says, "They're going to move Moira's bed into the living room. Put their mattresses down so they can sleep around her, like a laager. That way, if someone who's watching her needs help, with moving her or something, they'll be right there."

"So what's this list for?" I ask.

"It's the list for sleeping over."

"Why aren't I on the list for sleeping over?"

She looks at me in a shrewd way.

"I could do it, Martin's old enough," I protest.

She says, "Well who would you want around? Wouldn't you want your old lovers? They're the ones I'd want, for sure."

She laughs.

"Old lovers," I say, as if I do not understand.

This woman has been married to her husband forever. Every time I see him he has his head behind a newspaper. The sports section.

What could she possibly know about old lovers?

But it was me Moira asked to find Susanna.

I think constantly of Susanna. Where is she? What is she doing right now?

Susanna is walking along a city street, or eating a piece of bread, or opening a window.

(Behind her, in an unkempt apartment, the phone rings and rings.)

Susanna, not thinking of Moira.

Her head full of her own life, somewhere.

"What are you up to, Mum?" Martin asks.

He used to call me by my name when he was younger. Now he calls me Mum.

I'm cleaning out the spare room. For Susanna. Vacuuming, dusting, airing the room, putting out potpourri in a dark blue bowl. My cheeks are warm, my hands supple.

"She's coming," I tell him. "That friend of Moira's."

"But Mum," he says.

"But Mum nothing," I say. "She's coming."

Martin is helping me. We sit at the dining-room table, going through the lists.

"That just about wraps up Massachusetts, Mum," Martin says.

When Susanna comes, she will see how Martin is. How casual and generous in his young beauty.

Susanna will be the right age to appreciate Martin, my son.

I think I may have found her number. It was amazing luck, I was down to the 67th city on the list. I dialled this number in Toronto and there was a taped answer.

The voice sounded exactly right.

I left a message for her to call me as soon as possible.

She's the one.

I believe she's the one. I really believe that.

She'll come right away. I'll meet her at the airport, bring her to Moira.

For a break — because she'll need a break — I'll take her up to

Dee Why and she can be impressed by the waves and sand. And the beach will have the clarity of very early spring, before the sun washes everything out.

For light relief I'll explain to Susanna about the battle for the beaches. (What do we want? No more pooh! When do we want it? Now!)

She will know that Moira and I have a special connection; I won't need to explain.

But I'll tell her when she asks. About Moira's comfort with me, her frankness.

We will walk along the beach, Susanna and I, and we'll both be thinking about that.

"Inez," I say, pleased to have caught her in time. "I've got to talk to you." For once, with Inez I feel confident, in charge. We are standing in the driveway. (Ms Lawyer is off to the city, again.)

"It's about Susanna."

As I say this, Inez looks, briefly, as if she is falling through space. Then she pulls herself together.

"Don't tell me," she says, intensely irritated. "Not you too."

I stare at her.

"I suppose Moira's been asking you to help her find Susanna."

Has she been eavesdropping?

Does she know I went through Moira's things in her study?

"She's asked us," says Inez, slowly, emphatically.

"All of us. Ages ago."

I don't believe it.

"We've tried and tried. We've been driving Telecom crazy. But we've had to face it, we just can't find her."

"I guess you were her last resort," she says.

Then she started to laugh.

She turned around and walked back into the house. Went to the kitchen, where the night shift, the sleep-overs, were making breakfast.

I go out to the laundry. Take out a load of washing someone has left there. Put in a new load.

Measure the laundry soap, set the dial, make the wash turn and

tumble. See, I am quite capable of doing these things.

Take out Moira's sheets and the T-shirts she wears as nighties.

Hang them on the line where the sun shines, as it has to.

Out on the street, people are walking along. They are going to catch the train to work.

She would have told the others her stories, too. All of them.

Ages ago. Different bits for different people.

For me, early life and men. Auden, Lawrence.

From where I am, I can hear them.

Someone has just quipped "desperately seeking Susanna," and they all laugh.

It's laughter that says, this is totally crazy; this is serious.

It's laughter that says, we're deep into it here, my friends. And if it's a miracle you're waiting for, well don't count on it, matey, but one might show up, you never know, it just might.

You hear a lot of this laughter around Moira's house these days.

Listen to it, coming from the kitchen, now.

Cathy Stonehouse / THREE POEMS

ILLUMINATIONS

I

From a different coast you come to me
up the dark stairs, lights have been turned off
your flattened feet are bare, the weapon
hangs half-stiff between cotton flaps
secure in its power to induce the drowning element.
be a good quiet girl. be a good still dead quiet girl.
you climb up the slope of the seaside town
where you learned this trade,
past rocks where the lighthouse flickers,
mounting the steps to your own full size, the sheen
on your quiet flesh exuding its own numinous light.
this is for you, and you and you and you, mummy.
it's in between her fine striations that you'll bury me,
beyond the calculation of the beams, in the cove by the beach
where you buried memory.
as you open the bedroom door
you embrace the family seal,
its convex injunctions
emboss
into soft red wax
what you learned of the symbols 'father', 'daughter'.

i am six years old, afraid to move my eyes
in this body that the dark has given me,
pin-pricked by thin subtle sounds.
i'm waiting
on a cliffhead in my long white gown
for your rippling movements
there undressing beside the bed,
i know that i am doomed to die at sea
your cold white body rising
from the water, solid and vast
against which my tiny mind founders,
a neat wooden vessel, a tinkling marie celeste.

dark hair fanning out, green hands clutching at my neck
i'd swallow but there's no room:
i've seen far down your throat
to where the tongue lies down and cannot speak.
i'm soft and toothless in my shell
black roots of hairs stand out on your upper lip
lie still cathy lie still
and what of the words i know?

night-time seabird father
pubic bone slams against chest
if we are both vessels mine is full yours empty
when our masts clink together mine has a tinny sound.

||

hate no i love you no i
love no i hate you

carved into a grand figurehead, my
head and lungs
turned to wood

daddy

light
strikes your body
like a thin crown, cracks open eyes
like a whip, i can see

everything see
everything i needed to know
needed to know to live
inside you, hush

is this anchor hooked
around which i turn

|||

the wind is up
the night's a button-hook
pulls me
out of all this
tangling, pulled
through the eye of ceiling
that closes to seal you in

nothing moves below
the street lies flat as an ache

while your hair fills my mouth
i rise above our house
lost in the logic of other houses
the map of the ever-repeating
night, imagine

unclothed on the bed
bound wings chafing at my chest
how i travel

flying low above the river ridges
past the motorway
the tramp with his seven coats
snoring in a rusty van
on the road to scotland

travel past all thoughts of tomorrow
to where tarmac meets the sea:
Blackpool, dreaming of the night
they turn the lights on

you can make me dance
but up here strings of light unfurl
miraculous, gaudy
from my mouth

i burp forth elephants
china dogs, whirlwinds
watch the big wheel dip
and the tower door fly open

where an old man plays an organ
made of tiny children's toes
(falling)

MAGIC LANTERN

Thin as snowflakes bright in red coats
we are children stumbling through fog
my father's breath, white
and silent, blurs
into my baby arms
placed around his neck like a fur

then i overturn chairs
in our back garden
you play a small guitar too fast
bow to the camera
and we are specks of dust
an amber glow fading to grainy black

do i call this memory?

the light in the film unbandaging
thick and luminous as kitchen curtains
all it does not show
sharp into my body like a needle-point
expanding to a toxic explosion

the year you crushed your airfix models underfoot
plastic spitfires cracking into dust

when they tested the three-minute siren
on the roof of our school

and we did nothing but listen, carry on
our lives blown thin across the chem lab walls
bunsen-blue, brief experiments

swallow down the nineteen seventies
store them in labelled boxes
what unreels tonight
is the unstable element
you hold up in your hands

the magic lantern
full of shadow-horses, full of children
that run and run
strain their necks but never quite
break the tape

PHANTOM PAIN

*'I hear it all still: sheep's bleat on the moor
and the peewee's thin call in the weeds'* — Ken Smith

Sharp click of latch
into the garden shed.
Cigarette butts
mangled in the ashtray
a dry unfinished paragraph.

I touch cheap crystal, my hand
stunned as a bird on window glass
to recollect

the stone of his cold body,
clogged lungs cradled by a skin
bright and smooth as if
polished.

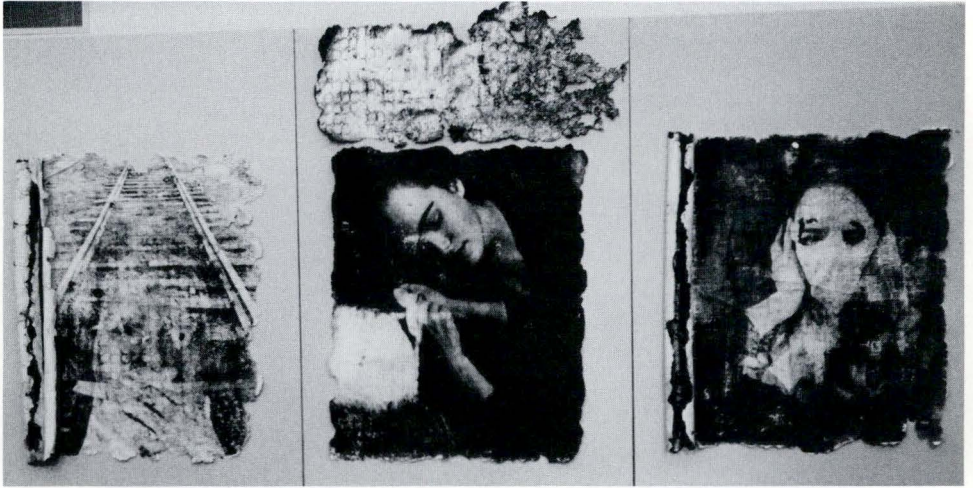
Daylight stripes
the tall wooden limb
of a spade, empty glove
my hand warms to, nerves colliding
with the reach of his dead fist.

I can hear the bright scratch
of sulphur on wood, the hiss
of his breath, catching:

never forgive.

DIANNE
BREHM
CACCHIONI



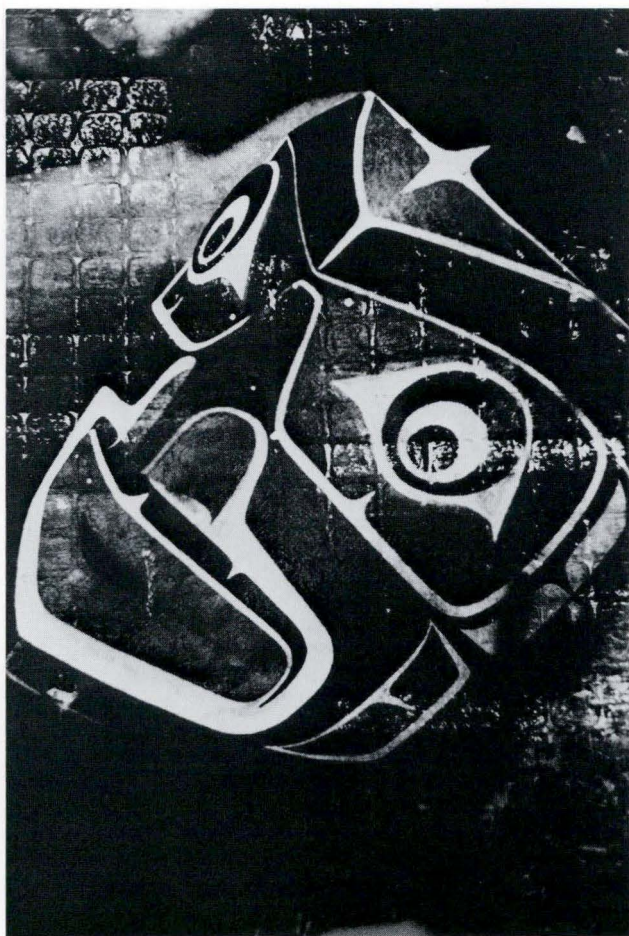


Consensual Fiction Part Two is about personal, historical and cultural displacement: the history that we inherit in our land, whether it's old or new; the history we are born with and the history we must transform.

I am seen throughout *Consensual Fictions* as the residual white mask (the past) worn by my daughter (the future). She was born in the same country I was, but my mother came from another place. A grandmother, a mother, a daughter belong to a chain of history, but at the same time they have different ways of interpreting things and events.

(Dimensions: 6 images, 18' x 5')





... difference and indifference



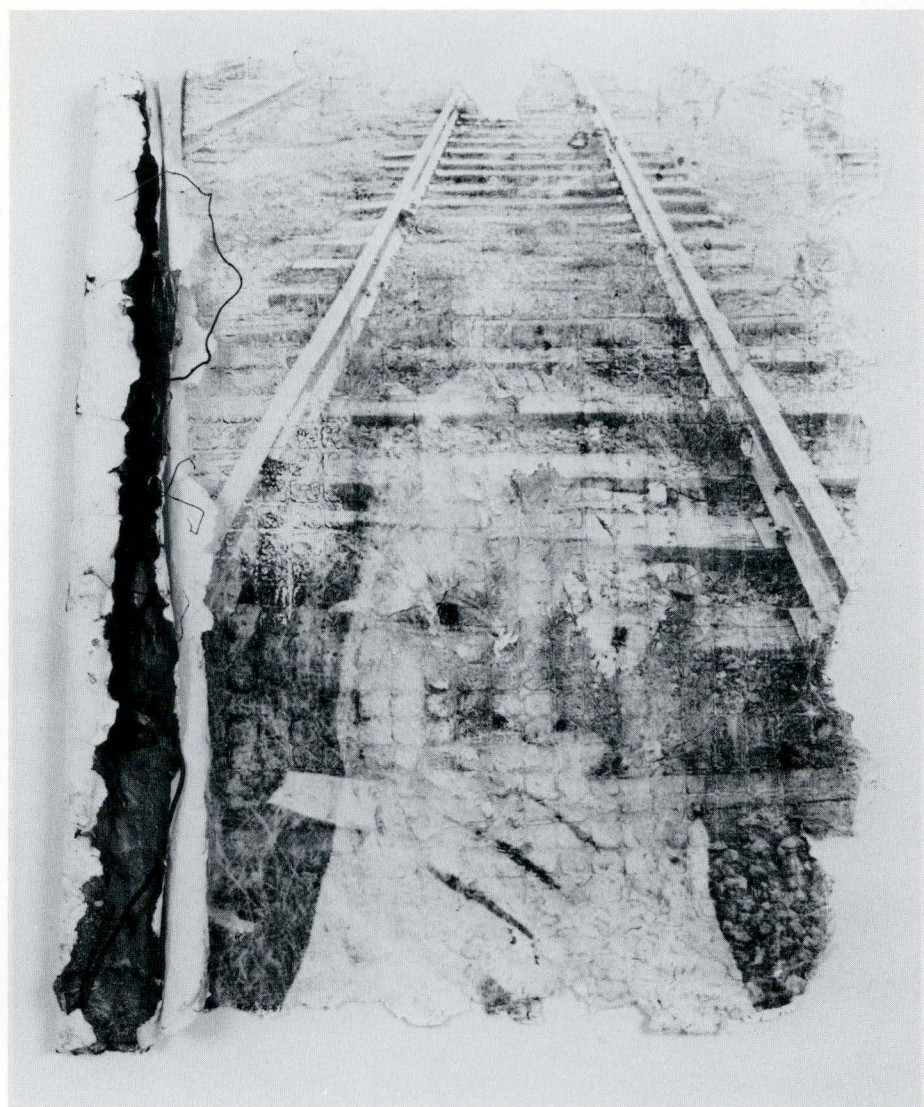


... categorizing and fragmenting



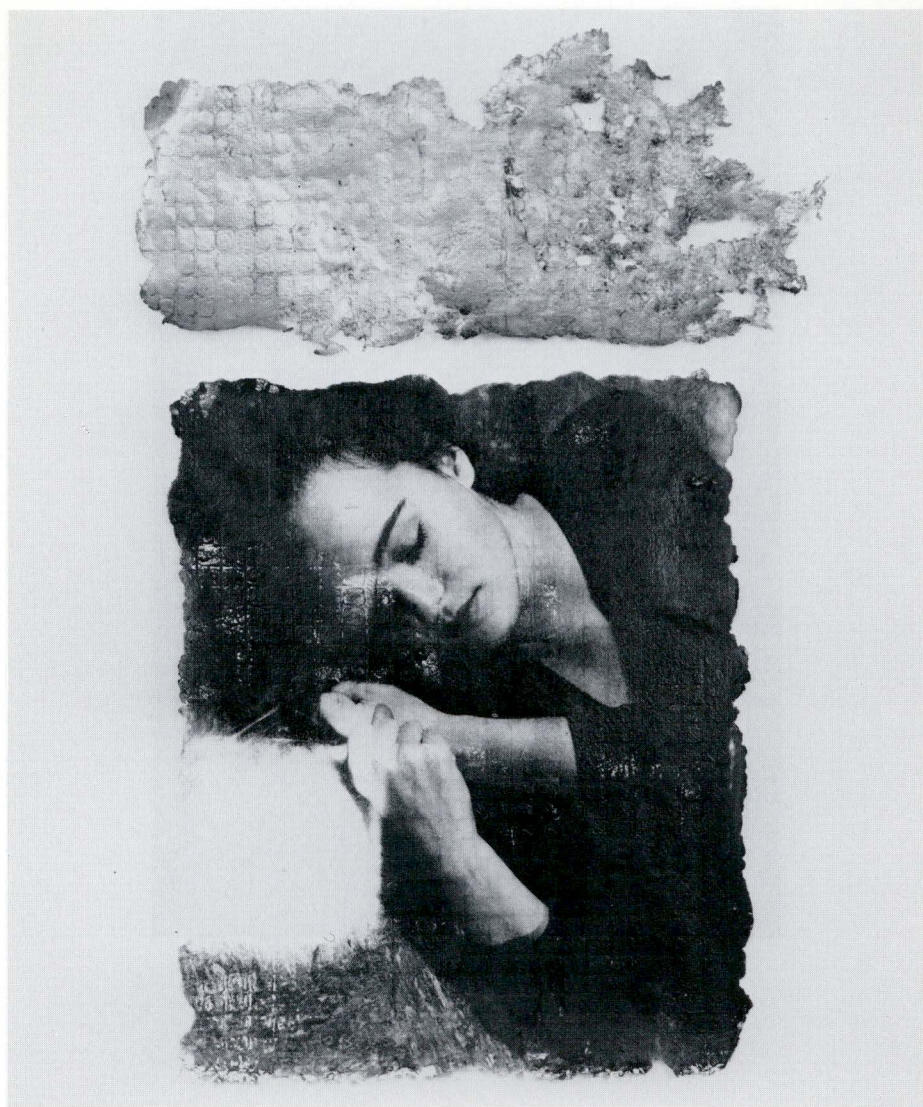


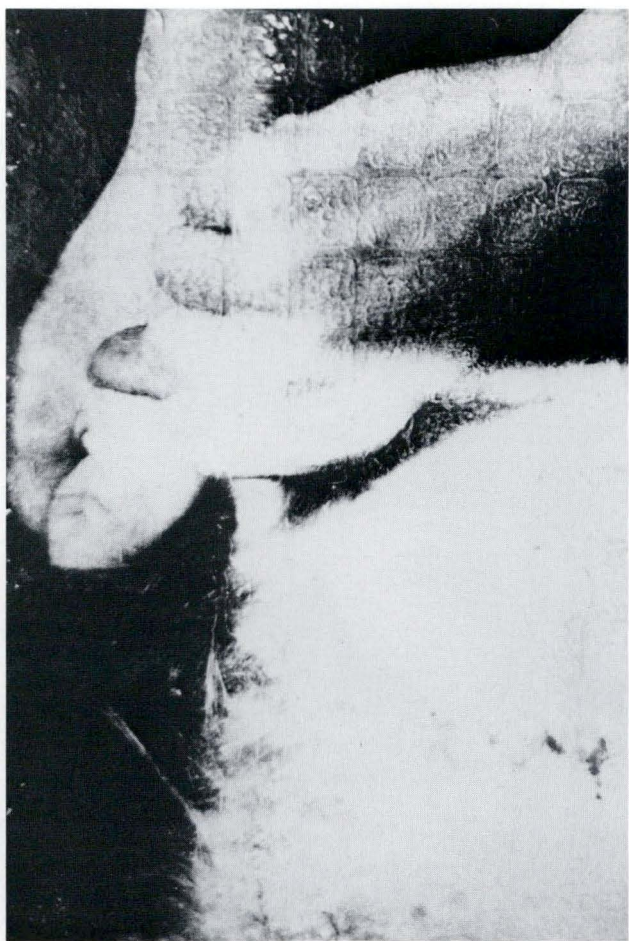
. . . displacement and disempowerment





... subversion and compliance





... logic and perception





DIANNE BREHM CACCHIONI

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1994 TRACE
 Community Arts Council Gallery, Vancouver
- 1992 CULTURE> <IMPACT
 Perel Gallery, Vancouver

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (CURATED)

- 1994 THE WORKS: A Visual Arts Celebration
 Arts & Cultural Festival XV Commonwealth Games, Victoria, B.C.
 Curator: Chris Best
- 1994 GO FIGURE
 Canadian Craft Museum, Vancouver, Curator: Ann Rosenberg
- 1993 ARTFOLIO International Art Exhibition
 ART 54 Gallery, New York
 Curators: Susan Kismaric, Curator, Museum of Modern Art, NYC
 Douglas Hyland, Director, San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas
 Kathleen Derringer, Curator, The Discovery Museum, Conn.
- 1993 ARTROPOLIS '93, Vancouver, Curator: Wendy Derennger
- 1992 KNOW NO BOUNDARIES
 Art in Public Places, Vancouver
 Curators: Melinda Mollineau & Marianne Nicholson
- 1989 NOTES ON THE NEXT MILLENEUM
 Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver, Curator: Karen Love

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (JURIED)

- 1994 SURFACES OF EVIDENCE
 Community Arts Council Gallery, Vancouver
- 1993 IMAGES AND OBJECTS
 11th Annual Juried Exhibition
 Community Arts Council Gallery, Vancouver
- 1993 B.C. FESTIVAL OF ARTS
 Trail, B.C.
- 1991 SEVEN INSTALLATIONS OF PHOTO-BASED WORK
 Le Magasin, Vancouver

Jane Covernton / IN MY COUNTRY

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

Yes, but what is that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

described to Jaime a place that didn't exist.

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

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

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

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

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

"That's a very sad story."

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

These are the things I'm thinking about:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Okay try again:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ooh my arms hurt," she moans.

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

"Ooh my head hurts."

"Ooh your head hurts."

"Ooh my heart hurts."

"Ooh your heart hurts."

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

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

Nobody was listening.

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

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

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

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

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

John Barton / FIVE POEMS

NUMBER THEORY

Far out into orbit,

the satellite's been launched,
launched from the cargo bay, spinning

not quite from
between
the thighs of the astronaut but remotely

programmed by touch,
the keyboard extending its reach with the robotic
arm.

The satellite spinning away —

antennas opening like

wings —

It receives at last and in a thousand languages

transmits
the first signals at an altitude far

beyond eyesight, except at night.
We follow the thread

of its faint

revolution without binoculars through rips

in the indigo stratus above

this planet where you and I
on a balcony know

no more than each other's names.

Which seem

to represent us whether they are accurate or not,
which we answer to,

like Soyous or Anik.

Tonight, over dinner, something unnamed
was served us,
which we are uncertain of, the savour

out of this world, piquant

like the salad of strawberries and freshly
milled pepper on spinach,
its structure more delicate

than gallium arsenide

devices.

Not quite known to us, as enticing

as quasars, those star-like

red presences at the edge
of the universe proven so far
only in theory by numbers relayed
from the satellites wheeling,
data gathered
with the Hubble telescope a fraction
of some primary
whole,
circumstantial evidence
reconfigured on earth for our benefit
pixel by pixel.

A potted
history of the big bang
which some men reset the hands
of two hearts by,

by virtue of a faint
subatomic hunger

for touch;
two
bodies of light beyond the visible

spectrum timelessly roaming the celestial vacuum.

DEMENTIA

The blood that stagnant,
sometimes sudden

river,
fast-moving and virulent.

Stories, currents
rising all too often to the wrists.

Why else do we sometimes slit them,
gorgeous, delirious.

Anger subletting the body,
flaring, uneasy

blood engorging organs.
These days we wear

protection, like raincoats,
an impermeable

layer of skin against the storm
within, two men gowned

like doctors in this way only
for an operation,

this bed,
the stories we don't want shared,

we can't stand them,
their denouement clinical solitude.

We are careful with each other.
The unsheathed

penis
a conduit of the loose-tongued

dementia we have come to be
afraid of, stories

leaking from the bloodstream,
my love, your love

confused with hurricanes
shouldering inland

from the coast,
the dawn birds silent,

flashflood and dissipating
mass destruction.

New paths for all rivers,
our destinies never the same.

MISSISSIPPI

How to interpret what is current
between us,
the electric slough at twilight, the symbols

keyed into memory and then with such
impulse one gentle and
solitary
<cr> sends so

much across emptiness, a power surge,
a flood,

the characters,

the character magnetic, attracting our fingers which
we entwine in the act

of input, the flesh fibre-optic,
charged with an ether

net of nerves,

the ditch I cross beside the parkway exit ramp
each morning, half-moon-shaped,
(my lop-
sided heart thinking out loud, nervous

for responses: yours,

mine, anyone else who listens in) a truncated

bit/memory byte of river
tremulous with ooze,
an oxbow

humming with midges and bulrushes and golden
rod and all other
imaginable virus, longing a fever

a delirium between

men, you and I: this love, this virtual
noise
at last something

codable, pure static
and amphibious

lyric, tadpoles and the whine of the crickets
deafening as I
walk through marsh grasses on the way in

to dailiness, snagging
the hair on my lower thighs and my hard-wired
routine,
reading the messages

left overnight by the others, sometimes
by you, whose lips

might well be electric, who sends me

hugs,

such voltage, *o love*

in 1993 such fertile wantonness: the Mississippi floods.

UNDERCURRENT

This is a bad semaphore
we practice
under the trees in the darkness, the damp white flags

of our t-shirts unable
to tease out

surrender as we move toward and away and past

one another, eyes
hungrily averted as we

pause

feet apart somewhere downstream along this
bridle path by the river,
the invisible

sibilant undercurrent deafened
by the cicada roar —
electric

morse code charging
the humid air of the city,
singing the *long, long, ecstatic short*

circuit of desire, the physiologic

imperative to be spent,
to be filled,

the white of our t-shirt dampness

impotent in the moonlight,
stained by pollen loose on the breeze,

what we want
not meant by the language

we tease out with flags,
its indefinite

pronouns not about the long

first person singulars of our cocks,
intimacy

straining against cotton shorts,
this language
the only language of love

available, though it does not include
us as *we*,
though we use it

badly, the damp t-shirt whiteness,
the fraternal tanned
presence underneath smelling of river algae and sweat

not drawing us closer,
our fear of how the white

flags of language distort

our kinship, seal us in the airless
eternal privacy of *they*

at the bottom of the river, graveyard of lovers

who unlike us, beloved stranger
(the park signs want us to believe)

could not resist the vortex.

SARANAC LAKE VARIATION

I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it, and at times when I would rather be dead the thought that I could never write another poem has so far stopped me. I think this is an ignoble attitude. I would rather die for love, but I haven't. — Frank O'Hara September 1959

Boxing Day 1993,
alone in my hotel room, reading
City Poet in the bath, (Bruce calls it
Brad Gouch's *I-do-this-I-do-that* life
and times of Frank O'Hara),
water hot and replenishable to my armpits,
toe blocking the overflow,
and I think of you,
far away in New Brunswick, (yes, it is
important) with your family, the frozen
Northumberland Strait outside
the window like a ghost looking in
while you dine no doubt
on leftover turkey and mince,

and I think of Frank's love of the unrequited,
the longing

and invention he needed to articulate his poems,
those windows.

The Adirondacks rise outside my hotel window
into grey light, your chest pushing
against my hand last

week as it slid, a cross-country skier
down and across
the plateau of your stomach, fingers coiling
round your cock in clouds of snow,
my mouth a blizzard about to
touch down, which you
sometimes becalm, afraid (I am not sure)
of my teeth or tongue or what
you may or may not pass on,
the springs of your bed
sighing beneath us like a stand-in
in some menage-à trois I said to
make you laugh, though you want this
variation (not the laughter)
hidden from all those who listen.

Something Frank never worried about
in the 1950s, the emergencies that he meditated in
the midst of (despite McCarthy)
more *automatisé*,
generations of Abstract Expressionists at the Cedar
apprehended by his conversation and surreal
appetite for straight men, Irish
tears and bourbon, jazz,

spontaneous poems
dribbled unrevised
on the backs of coasters in 10 minutes flat
for someone in their circle (the nerve
of those private
asides drawing the rest of us — his future
readers — in) before he headed out

onto 8th Street drunkenly at 2 AM, alone or not alone,
love with a Manhattan skyline a sentimental
disease of his cruisy,
immuno-deficient (ie. vulnerable) spirit only.

In our time love has become a slogan, a cold
wind howling in the streets
of liberation, something we keep before the courts,
a paper coolly delivered at seminars
worldwide where doctors,
scientists, and activists compete
on how best to shield the sick
and unsick from variations mutating
like wind-sheer in the blood and in the minds
of those who wish us
dead, hate
no less virulent than in Frank's time —
only how the language is used
has mutated,
has kept mutating since his death,
though how it mutates and the aesthetics
of mutation (a.k.a. The Tradition)
allow it, chimera-like, to persist in secrets.

Frankly speaking, as Frank would say, the discourse
from the bathtub should be direct
(hot or cold), ie. _____,
find me irresistible, though I can be a
klutz, for instance nearly dropped Frank in at least once so far;
the sodden pages might well have frozen
shut and cut his story short

(which would be sad since he died
(not from love — on Fire Island
a beach taxi ran him down) at 40).

This afternoon the wind has been too
unspeakable and crystalline
for anyone to skate for long on Mirror Lake.
The wind-chilled glass in my window
changes steam rising from the bath
to frost and now I can't see
myself, so am lost and ready to confess
that I, Frank's pale imitation (Bruce says
I echo his looks), wasn't straight

about you with John and Lorraine
this morning over breakfast, invoked you
not in conversation by name
(who am I protecting?),
only as someone's son who came here once,
not my lover lured by the fleeting
weekend leaves with your parents to stay
in this hotel, perhaps sleeping comfortably
in the roomy bed where last night I dreamt of you,
where you might have once
dreamt about someone like me,

anticipating our bodies, a variation
on the unconscious,
therefore primordial and beloved.
Desire takes many forms, but perhaps what
is unspoken cannot be

edited out and (sweet ellipsis) becomes
the content of the poem —

 windows blown out
by winds loosening chance
ecstatic needles from stands of white
pine on some far shore that even
a city boy like Frank would walk along
for lack of anything else
new to write about.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

JOHN BARTON's sixth collection, *Designs from the Interior* was published this spring by House of Anansi Press. His fifth, *Notes toward a Family*, was published last spring by Quarry Press. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The American Voice*, *Christopher Street*, *The Malahat Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *Prairie Fire* and *TickleAce*.

ROBIN BLASER, in company with Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan, helped bring into being a poetry known and revered as that of the "San Francisco School." Over the years he has published numerous works, including *Pell Mell* (1988), and in 1993 he brought together all the elements of his poetry in *The Holy Forest* (Coach House Press). Robin lives in Vancouver, and he first read "Letter from ... Letter to ..." at Capilano College in January 1994 to a primarily student audience — a brilliantly memorable evening.

DIANNE BREHM CACCHIONI is a Vancouver photo-based artist. Her process and ritual of art-making is the mainstay for her pursuit of social, cultural, and historical ideas. The questions she poses concern feminine archetypes, issues of representation, cultural, social, and personal constructs. *Consensual Fictions Part I* 1992 and *Part II* 1994 prompted her to make the paper used in these bodies of work.

JANE COVERNTON has had stories published in *Event*, *Room of One's Own*, and other literary magazines. She received a National Magazine Award (Silver — Personal Journalism) for a story in *Saturday Night*. And she was given a Canada Council Explorations grant to work on her novel, *Raindrops and Smoke*. She lives in Vancouver.

ELIZABETH HAYNE's poetry and fiction have appeared in *absinthe*, *blue buffalo*, *Dandelion*, *Dinosaur Review*, *Other Voices*, *Prairie Fire*, *Sanscrit*, *Vox*, and the anthologies *Tilted to the Plane of the World* (Galbraith

Publishing), *The Issues Collection — Families in Transition* (McGraw Hill Ryerson), *Alberta Rebound* and *Boundless Alberta* (NeWest Press). She is a fiction editor of *blue buffalo* and works as a Speech Language Pathologist in Calgary. Her manuscript, *Speak Mandarin not Dialect*, has been solicited by Turnstone Press.

GAYLA REID won the 1994 CBC/ *Saturday Night* Fiction Competition. In 1993 she won the Journey Prize and the Silver Medal National Magazine Award for Fiction. Her first collection of short stories, *To Be There with You*, will be published this fall by Douglas and McIntyre.

CATHY STONEHOUSE is a British writer living in Vancouver, whose work has appeared in various Canadian literary journals. She recently received a Canada Council Explorations Grant to write a first novel. Her first collection of poetry, *The Words I Know*, will be published in the fall of 1994 by Press Gang Publishers of Vancouver.

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